

THE
PHANTOM
CANOE

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MOWERY

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WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

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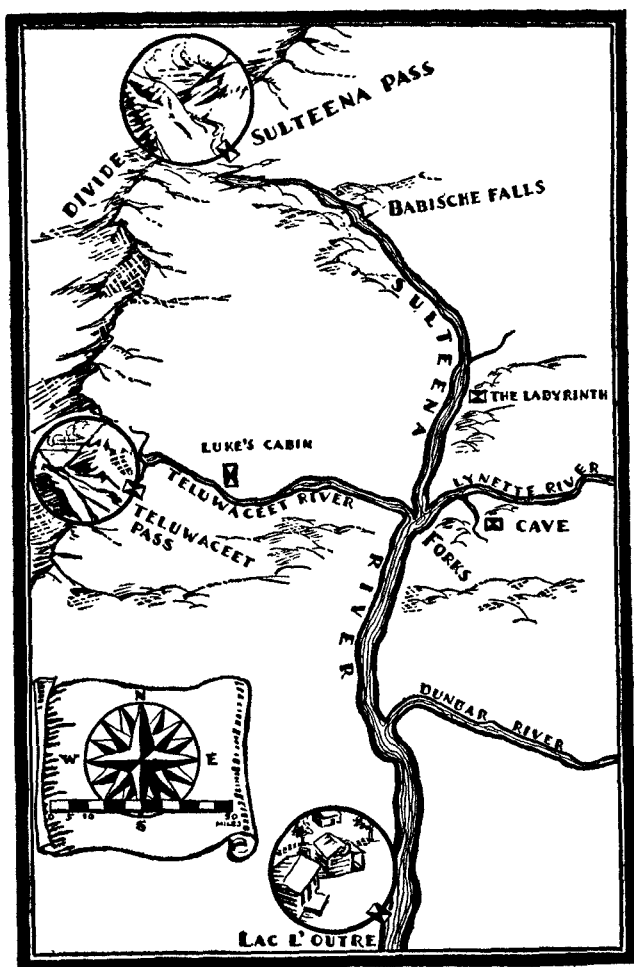
THE PHANTOM CANOE


BOOKS BY
WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

The Silver Hawk, 1928
The Girl from God's Mercie, 1929
Heart of the North, 1930
Singer of the Wilderness, 1931
Forbidden Valley, 1933
Challenge of the North, 1934
Resurrection River, 1935
The Phantom Canoe, 1935


To
PEGGY

THE PHANTOM CANOE





Chapter One



WITH no suspicion of the man-trap that he was walking into, young Laramie nosed his battered canoe against the boat landing at Lac L'Outre and stepped out, stiff and paddle-weary.

The lights of the little post, twinkling cheerily in the soft owl-dusk, sent a glow of happiness through the over-worked youth. Five lonely months back in the wild Sulteena ranges had made him hungry for human comfort, for human voices again and human company; and he was glad that his loneliness and toil had come to an end.

Tonight, here at Lac L'Outre; tomorrow, on down Sulteena River to the Landing; then on by train to Edmonton, with money enough for his last university year and that cherished degree in geology — that was the vista ahead of him now, the

happy reward which he had hammered out by a summer of terrific hardship and labor.

On the wharf a dozen half-breeds and swart Timber Crees were sitting about on the rough logs; and against a pierhead leaned a tall Mounted corporal, toying with his swagger stick while he listened to the jargon of Cree and bush-French.

As Alan Laramie's canoe came gliding in, the talk broke off abruptly. Silent, questioning, the group stared sharply at the weather-beaten young stranger who had appeared out of the twilight of the river.

Friendly toward everybody, because of that glow within him, Alan greeted them cordially. "Hello, fellows!" And to the Mounted officer, "How d'you do, Corporal."

Not one of the Crees or *métis* answered him by so much as a grunt. Their glances roved suspiciously from him to his canoe, to the three packs in it, and back again to him; and a queer tension settled over the group.

In sharp contrast to them the Mounted officer nodded in a friendly way. A man of thirty-three, with a touch of melancholy brooding in his deliberate hazel eyes, he had a quiet air of authority about him, as of a man with natural gifts above ordinary; and his manners, his bearing, gave impression that he was a person of culture and wealth and education.

"Good evening," he returned Alan's greeting. His

glance swept Alan's tattered clothes; he smiled at a tuft of hair protruding comically through a hole in Alan's dilapidated hat. "You look as though you've been loping the bush lately, friend."

"I have been, Corporal — so damned long I was beginning to talk porcupine and grizzly bear," Alan agreed. He introduced himself, "Name's Laramie, Alan Laramie."

The officer extended his hand. "I'm glad to know you, Laramie. My name is Eric Norman."

As they shook hands and their gaze met, between them sprang that tacit feeling of two men who like each other instinctively. With something of admiration in his eyes, Norman surveyed the powerfully built youth, from his muddy boots to his sun-darkened face; he smiled again at that comical tuft of hair; and Alan grinned back at him.

"Whereabouts here, Norman," Alan inquired, "can a tramp like me bunk up for the night? I'm burned out on mud bars and mosquitoes."

"Come over to the Police building and spread your poke there. We've plenty of room."

"Why, thanks, partner. I'll ankle up to the trading station for a civilized shirt and hat, and then I'll tote my stuff over."

Humming a tune, Alan started up the slab walk.

Only twenty-two — little more than a boy — the eager-eyed collegian had made his way north to the Grizzly Range that May, while the spring avalanches still were thundering down; and throughout the

open season he had hawked float gold from the sand battures of glacial creeks and rivers. Knowing geology not only from books but from hard-knock field experience, he had selected his sands wisely — red Jurassic sands, where the yield ran highest; and during the long days of the Northland summer he had sweated with shovel, tom-rocker and crude little sluice for fifteen, eighteen, even twenty hours a day.

But the back-breaking labor, the icy waters, the torturing *brûlé* flies and the mountain loneliness — all that lay behind him now; and the small haversack nestling under his jacket held a tiny leathern poke containing a good two pounds of dust.

He was proud that he had gone into a sullen wilderness and gotten treasure from it at first hand, even if only six tablespoons of treasure; and prouder still that last spring, when he was penniless and faced with a jobless summer, he had struck out for himself in bold energetic fashion instead of drifting along and accepting whatever came.

Out of that experience he had spun a bit of philosophy which seemed to him infinitely more valuable than the yellow dust he had gathered. . . . Good luck does not just happen, hit or miss. *A man makes his own good luck.* A man is master of the circumstances of his life and can mold them however he likes, if he but tries.

This ancient question of man against destiny had always been a matter of hot debate within Alan,

who was considerably more thoughtful a person than his husky size and rough speech gave hint of. Ever since he was twelve years old, when he had run away from an orphan mission in the Athabasca, he had been entirely on his own, homeless and wandering, plowing his way toward education and happiness. In that knockabout existence it often had seemed to him that sheer luck, good and bad, shaped a person's life far more than did a person's deliberate efforts. A disheartening belief, that. If a man was at the mercy of hapchance, why plan, why work?

But during his college years at Edmonton, and especially during this past summer in the mountains, he had largely shaken off this philosophic blight. Standing on the threshold of young manhood, a little bewildered by the immensity of life and by the thousand pathways open to him in every direction, he told himself that his future lay in his own hands and that whatever he became in the years ahead would be wholly and solely of his own making. . . .

When he stepped into the Hastings trading station he glanced through the fog of tobacco smoke at the 'breeds, Crees and white men there, droning away the hours till bedtime with trap-line gossip. The store looked poverty-stricken, with its shelves half bare and its cracked windows patched with paper; yet it was cleanly swept and orderly, and around the wall hung creels of bright-colored autumn flowers.

As Alan closed the door, the store loiterers looked

up at him, stopped talking, stared at him sharply — with that same queer silence which had greeted him down at the wharf.

“What the deuce are these people all gawking at me about?” Alan wondered. For a moment he thought that maybe his athletic fame had penetrated even to this northern Rockies outpost and that these people were recognizing him as “the Rambling Boulder”, from pictures in the Edmonton papers.

But he paid little attention to the men or their stares, for his glance was caught and held by a brown-haired girl of twenty, over behind the trading counter.

Perched on a stool, the girl was reading a book, by light of a kerosene lamp. Young, neatly dressed in a cheap gingham frock, she looked all out of place in that drear trading station; all out of keeping with its roughness, its peltry odors and the coarse talk of those river *métis* and Indians.

To his knowledge Alan had never seen the girl before, but he believed she must be the daughter of Boyd Hastings, the Lac L'Outre trader. He had heard mention, a time or two, of Joan Hastings.

Guessing that she was in charge of the store, he stepped across the room to the counter. Buried oblivion-deep in her reading, the girl did not notice him. Alan glanced at her book. The text of it was in strange characters, but the title was in English — “The Anabasis of Xenophon.”

It struck him as odd that here in a frontier trading station, amid this "muskrat talk" and the stale odor of raw fur, he should come upon a person reading a Greek classic, shutting out her dismal surroundings and living in the adventurous world of the long-dead ancients.

The kerosene lamp shone full on her face — a winsome, hauntingly pretty face; and as Alan stared at her across the counter a vague memory stirred in him. Somewhere, sometime, he had met this girl. Faintly, like a half-forgotten dream, her face was tantalizingly familiar.

Striving to place her, he stared at the light-spangles in her silky brown hair, at her resolute small chin, at her lips and sun-tanned cheeks. He thought back across his three university years, his boyhood in the Calgary hills and the Athabasca, his various jobs here and there; and tried to recall where he had encountered her; but memory eluded him.

There was an intangible air of cloistered aloofness about the girl; and this led Alan to believe that she was a serious-minded creature, thoroughly unawakened to affairs of the heart. "A cool number," he put her down. "No petting allowed. Keep off the grass. I'd bet both legs that if she went to the university she'd be a durned Phi Beta!"

But then he saw on her young face a weariness and the unmistakable signs of deep worry; and he was instantly sympathetic. Those autumn flowers

and the neatness of the store said plainly that she was running this trading station all by herself. The half-empty shelves, the general pinch of poverty, the harassment on her face, told him that this girl had fallen upon evil times.

Apologetic at disturbing her, he cleared his throat, pushed back his battered hat. "Please," he said, "I'd like to buy a few things, if you'll take dust. I have no cash."

The girl looked up. As her cool brown eyes appraised him, Alan was acutely conscious of his patched clothes, his beard, his disreputable appearance. Yet the girl was not hostile or critical. Rather she was friendly, either because of his courtesy or the silent call of youth to youth.

Their gaze met. They stared at each other. . . . For the second time within the space of ten minutes Alan found himself meeting a person whom he instinctively liked.

"We take dust," the girl replied. She reached around to a shelf for a small scales in a glass cage. "There's been quite a deal of washing along the Sulteena in the last two summers. We get more dust than furs now."

She adjusted the delicate instrument, then looked up at Alan again. Frowning a little, she studied him narrowly, her glance sweeping from his wavy hair to his work-calloused hands and back to his gray frank eyes; and Alan had the distinct impression that she was struggling, like himself, to remember

where he and she had encountered each other.

"How much dust do you wish to weigh, Mr. ——"

"Laramie," Alan supplied, knowing that she was fishing for his name. "I'll weigh five dollars' worth, please."

At his name the girl gave a little start of sudden recognition; and Alan realized that she knew him well and that only his beard and tattered clothes had kept her from recognizing him when she first looked up.

But still he could not place her; and to his disappointment she did not follow up her opening or drop him any clue to that previous meeting.

In his puzzlement about the girl, he failed to notice that his poke, as he took it from his haversack, was suspiciously light. Not until he started to pour upon the tiny ivory pan did he realize that something was amiss.

Instead of gold, a trickle of black sand rolled out.

Dumfounded, Alan stared blankly at the coarse grains. "What the devil!" he exclaimed, beneath his breath. He poured a little more, hastily; and that too came out black. He opened the poke mouth wide and looked into it; and his face went gray. With trembling fingers he dumped out the whole content.

It was all sand.

Speechless and bewildered, he stared with unbe-

lieving eyes at the little pile, at the girl, at the pile again — staggered by this devil's miracle which had made worthless black sand of his yellow dust.

"Good Lord!" he jerked out. "*What's become of my gold?*" . . .

Among the store loiterers, who scented something exciting and came crowding up close, there was a disposition to believe that the young stranger was feigning this loss and trying to put across some smart city trick. But Joan Hastings did not think so. Level-headed and cool, she took charge.

"Are you sure," she asked Alan, "that you kept your gold in this pouch?"

"Why — why, yes," Alan stammered, all dazed by his tragic loss. "I didn't have any dummy poke."

"Where have you been carrying this pouch, Mr. Laramie?"

"Here, in this haversack. Right next to me, always — even when I was working ——"

Joan checked him. "When was the last time that you looked into this pouch and made sure your gold was still in it? Be certain of this."

"Yesterday. Only yesterday noon. I looked into it every day, all summer ——"

"Just a minute. Did you meet anybody between yesterday noon and now?"

Her calm methodical questioning brought Alan out of his daze; and he strove to think.

"I — yes, I did meet . . . It was yesterday evening, up at the mouth of the Dunbar. He came in

to my camp about dark and borrowed some grub and cooked his supper over my fire, and we talked a while before turning in. He was gone this morning when I got up. But look — *he* couldn't have taken my gold. I slept with that haversack under my head."

"Who was this man?" Joan questioned.

"Why, he was — was . . . Come to think of it, he didn't drop his name, and I didn't ask. I just called him 'partner.'"

For a moment Joan Hastings regarded Alan silently, with pity in her brown eyes. Then: "That man robbed you, Mr. Laramie. You had traveled hard, you were tired, you slept soundly, and so he was able to get at your gold without waking you. He replaced the dust with this heavy sand so that you wouldn't notice your loss until too late."

Alan's thoughts went flashing back to his camp of last night; to the wiry glint-eyed stranger who had come walking into his campfire glow; to their talk; to his guileless disclosure that he had been hawking float that summer and was carrying seven hundred dollars' worth of dust out of the mountains.

Beyond any doubt that man *had* robbed him, in the manner that Joan Hastings said.

Slowly, as he gazed at the handful of sand, it came home to him that his gold, the precious dust for which he had slaved all summer, was gone; that he was penniless now, owning nothing but the patched clothes he stood in. And then, with a stunning jolt, he further realized that his last uni-

versity year, his geology degree, the whole sunlit vista up ahead, had suddenly vanished — snatched away from him in the night by a bush-sneak's cunning.

"I'm sorry," Joan said quietly, touched by the anguish in his gray eyes. "Awf'ly sorry, Mr. Laramie. You were over-trusting, I'm afraid."

Alan wetted his lips. "But — but when a fellow eats your grub and uses your fire, you never expect him to turn around and rob you. That's what *he* did — the bush rat." He flung the sand on the floor; his fists slowly clenched, he looked up at Joan and swore, almost tearfully, "I'm heading back upriver! I'll collar that fellow; I'll get my gold back; I'll nail that thieving carcajou to a tree and skin him alive!"

Gently the girl pointed out, "He's faded into the bush by now and disappeared; and there's a staggering amount of country up north for you to comb through."

"I'll chase him to Alaska and back! I'll get him if it takes a year! No man is going to rob me like that without ——"

He was interrupted — by a hand upon his shoulder. He turned, found himself confronting Corporal Eric Norman; and the eyes of the Mounted officer were sharp and hard with suspicion.

Through the open door the Crees and *métis* of the wharf had come trooping, following Norman; and they surrounded the young newcomer. As Alan

glanced at them and at Norman's stern face, a tingle of uneasiness shot through him. Of alarm and of premonition. He had no knowledge that there at Lac L'Outre events which had been months in the making had suddenly let loose and were avalanching down, and that he, an innocent stranger, was caught in the deadly slideway; but he did recognize trouble when it faced him.

"Where are you from, Laramie? — if that's your name," Norman demanded.

"My home, you mean?" Alan managed, jarred by this ominous change in the Mounted officer. "Why, I don't exactly have any home, or people. I just go to the university in winter and work around, here and there, in summer."

Joan Hastings spoke up. "Eric, his name *is* Alan Laramie. *I* know."

Norman looked at her. "Positive of that, Joan?"

"Dead positive!"

Norman's eyes came back to Alan. Behind his sharp suspicion lingered that instinctive friendliness, as though he earnestly wanted to believe well of the young collegian.

"What's your business in this country, Laramie?"

"I've been washing sand, up Sulteena."

"Let's see your dust."

"I — I haven't any — now."

"Why not?"

"I got robbed last evening. A fellow cleaned me."

An expression of sorrow and disillusionment spread

over Norman's face. He said slowly, "I didn't much expect you to have any dust. Tell me, Laramie — where were you four days ago?"

"Why, I was up north, up above Sulteena Forks. Four days ago I was just coming out of the Grizzlies."

"If you can only prove that, friend!"

"Prove what?"

"Where you were last Tuesday."

"You mean, did I meet anybody up there? Why, no. There's nobody in that country. Not even Smokies. But that's where I was."

"I'd like to believe you," Norman stated, "but I have proof to the contrary." He demanded abruptly, "What's that pack of furs doing down there in your canoe?"

In his misery over the loss of his dust, Alan had completely forgotten about the little bale of peltry which that stranger had entrusted to him last night; but now Eric Norman's sharp question recalled the matter.

"Why," he explained, somewhat confusedly, "a man gave it to me. Yesterday evening. Up at the mouth of the Dunbar."

"A man — who?"

"I don't know his name or anything about him. He talked like a bush-losing free-trader of some sort," Alan answered candidly. "I just happened to meet him there, and he asked me if I wouldn't take that pack down river and drop it off with the H-B

people at the Landing; and I said, 'Yes, sure.' But see here, what're you pouncing on me about? What's the big idea of all these questions?"

Norman regarded him with stony disbelief. "So! You just happen to meet a man, a stranger — just a vague somebody — and he gives you a thousand-dollar bale of peltry! That's pretty thin, friend. I was hoping you could explain, but instead you hand me a flimsy lie like that." He made a little gesture which seemed to say that his last hope of the youth's innocence had flickered out.

Alan bristled up belligerently. "Don't go calling me a liar, you! I'm telling you the truth. If you don't believe it, go take a jump. What're you driving at?"

Norman brushed the question aside. "Rather clever of you to show up here at Lac L'Outre. Here's the last place on earth where anyone would expect you to appear. But you really should have cached the rifle before coming in."

"What rifle?"

"That Mannlicher-Schoenauer down there in your gun case. It may interest you to know that I've identified the bullet that killed Seth Grindley."

At the word "killed" something cold clutched Alan's heart — the cold icy fingers of fear. In a vague way he grasped that a murder had been done and that he was somehow being linked with that murder. For the first time he noticed that Eric Norman was holding a pair of handcuffs.

"I *haven't* got a Mannlicher-Schoenauer!" he denied bewilderedly. "That's an old .303 Ross down there in my case. Go look at it and see!"

"I've looked!" Norman snapped. And he added, sardonically, "I suppose that this mythological stranger gave you his gun too!"

An ugly mutter arose among the crowded listeners — an ominous rumble of anger and mob vengeance. Behind the trading counter Joan Hastings had gone pale of face at this startling revelation about the gun and fur pack; and with frightened eyes she was looking from the tall corporal to the taller and younger collegian.

"Eric!" she interposed. "I believe, I *know*, that Mr. Laramie is telling you the truth. I know he did meet a man, as he says."

"*How* do you know, Joan?"

"Because — because I do! I just know! This man, whoever he was, not only robbed Mr. Laramie but gave him that pack of furs and planted that gun in his case. Don't you see it? Don't you see that Mr. Laramie has been framed?"

Norman shook his head sorrowfully. "No, Joan; no frame-up here. Those stamped furs, that murder gun, and now this cock-and-bull story about a stranger . . . I didn't want to believe he's guilty, but I've got to."

In utter bewilderment Alan stared from Joan to Norman, not even knowing what they were talk-

ing about. Who was this Grindley person? And what stamped furs? And why all this ugly mob temper among the jostling Crees and *métis*?

A huge half-breed burst out: "*Allons!* We got de man dat kill' Seth! Le's string heem op, de y'ong carcajou! Le's shoot heem jus' lak he shoot —"

Norman whirled on the 'breed. "Silence, you! *I'm* handling this. One more word from you or from anybody else about stringing this fellow up, and you'll land in the Police butter-tub on your ear!" He turned again to Alan. "You're under arrest. No trouble, please." And he repeated the formula, "I warn you that anything you say will be used against you."

Except for the dangerous temper of those crowded men, Alan would have laughed. Arrested for murder, for killing a man of whom he had never heard — it seemed a bit fantastic.

"Go chase your tail," he rapped at Norman. "You're barking up the wrong tree, fellow. Did you ever hear of 'false arrest'? That's what I'll plaster onto you, and damned hard, if you jug me. I'm warning you."

Norman held out the handcuffs. "Bluffing won't get you anywhere, friend. Come along."

Alan shoved the manacles away. His self-assurance, the confidence of one who was innocent, was deserting him. "*I* haven't done anything," he insisted. "You're crazy, the whole pack of you —"

jumping on me all spraddled out! Let me tell you who I am. Let me explain about that man, about those furs —— ”

“You can tell all that to the proper authorities,” Norman said coldly. He seized Alan’s wrist and attempted to snap on the handcuffs.

The steely jingle of those manacles frightened Alan as he had seldom been frightened in his life. Bewildered and all in the dark, he understood only the one glaring fact — he was being arrested and booked for murder. Panic seized him. He saw this arrest as a trap springing shut, a mantrap, catching him in its mysterious jaws; and he fought against it with blind unreason, as he would have fought against any deadly trap.

He struck Norman’s hand aside. The officer seized him again. Panicky and furious, Alan wrenched free, swung at Norman, smashed him on the jaw with a work-hardened fist, and knocked the corporal groggy with that one powerful blow.

As Norman staggered against the trading counter, all the other men, fifteen or eighteen of them — all who could get in close enough — flung themselves upon Alan like a hostile wave, striking and kicking at him and trying to drag him down.

With his back to the counter Alan fought them off. A dogfight was his particular glory. He was big and powerful; on the football and hockey fields he had learned how to handle himself in a piled-up *mêlée*; and his summer in the mountains had hard-

ened him to sinewy rawhide. Tearing loose from half a dozen grappling arms, he smashed a red-bearded trapper and knocked him cold; swung on a 'breed and stretched the man on the floor; picked a squat Cree up bodily and flung him half across the room; drove a jab at a man who was kicking him, and cracked the fellow's head against the counter.

The big *métis* came plowing in close and landed a bare-knuckle smash on Alan's chin. Alan crouched a little, measured the huge 'breed, nailed him with a terrific right uppercut, staggered him with a one-two crash to the face, and sent him reeling backward against the others, with a broken nose and sagging jaw.

"Alan!" — it was Joan Hastings' voice, clear and ringing, above the oaths and grunts and mob yells. "Break free! Break out of here! You've been framed! Get away from them!"

With a lunge Alan charged into the men between him and the door. Three of them went down before his crashing swings. The others closed upon him, surrounded him, rushed him again. But they could not hold him or drag him down. For a little time, with five or six of his assailants knocked out completely, with several others staggering from his blows, it looked as though he would whip the roomful of them and plow his way to the door and escape.

But Eric Norman had shaken off his daze and was coming in; the huge *métis* had grabbed a belt-ax from an Indian and was shouldering the others aside

for a murderous smash at young Laramie; and four men had slammed the door, barred it with the heavy inside beam, and were blocking Alan's path.

Norman tore the belt-ax away from the 'breed and flung the dangerous weapon behind the counter; but the *métis* barged on into the fight, bare-handed, sprang upon Alan from behind and bore him to his knees.

Instantly the others were on top of Alan, crushing him by sheer massed weight. Twice he rose up, fighting frantically, but now he had no room to swing and to clear a space around himself. With men pinioning his legs and arms and someone kicking him in the face, he was finally dragged down, made prisoner. . . .

Still groggy from that smashing fist-blow, Corporal Norman twisted the young collegian's arms behind his back and locked the handcuffs.

Chapter Two

THROUGH the steel-barred door of the Police jail Eric Norman announced:

"Somebody's here to see you, Laramie. Pull yourself together."

Inside the cell, from the cot where he had been sitting through the blackest period of his life, Alan raised his head. His jacket and shirt were torn, his knuckles broken and bleeding, his face bruised from the mauling in the store; but he was unconscious of physical hurt and pain—the bewildered misery inside of him blotted them out.

"Keep 'em away from here, the damned curiosity-mongers!" he snarled savagely. The long grilling in Norman's office had put his nerves on edge; the hostile faces peering at him through the office window, the lynch yells from the darkness outside, had made him hate the sight of a fellow human.

"As you wish," Norman agreed, not without sympathy; and he turned to go back the little hallway to his office.

Alan stopped him. "I heard you holding off that pack of 'breeds and Smokies a while ago, when they tried to rush this place and haul me out. That was pretty nervy of you, all by yourself. If you hadn't stood by me, I'd be strung from a tree by now."

"That was my job," Norman said simply. He added, "Better try to catch some sleep, Laramie. I've got to take you down to the Landing tomorrow morning early."

"Sleep — with a murder charge against me? D'you think I'm a stick of wood? Good God — *sleep* —"

Norman rested a hand on a bar. "Laramie, give me a chance to help you," he urged, almost pleadingly. "My help may mean the difference between a life term and the gallows. When I turn you over, at the Landing, you'll be arraigned and indicted, and I can't do a thing for you then. I took you for a fine sort, and I still think you are, deep down. If I know anything about crime and criminals, you had an accomplice in this killing, and he's primarily the guilty party. You're trying to shield him. That's useless; we'll find out anyway. Alan, who was this other man?"

Alan jumped up from the cot. "There *wasn't* any other man! Haven't I told you that a thousand times? Get out!"

"Then, if there was no other man, where did *you* cache the rest of Grindley's peltry, and what did *you* do with his dust?"

Alan strode to the door, his fists clenching and unclenching. "You ask me that question one more time, you, and I'll tear this chicken-coop to pieces and break every bone in your carcass! I don't know anything about your damned furs and dust. Get out, you blockheaded bush cop! It's a hell of a lot you know about crime and criminals — jugging me for something I never heard of till you yourself told me! *Scram!*"

Without reply Norman turned away and stepped down the corridor.

Contrite for his angry explosion, Alan trudged back to his cot and slumped down, head in hands, thinking, trying to realize that he, Alan Laramie, was actually in a Police jail charged with murder. His meeting with that shadowy stranger, the loss of his precious little poke, the fight and arrest and now this dark cell — it all seemed more like a nightmare than like sober reality.

For a time, even after his arrest, he had believed that this charge was just a hasty mistake, easy to clear up; but the grilling had jolted him out of that notion. For he knew at last the details about the murder of which he stood accused. Here at Lac L'Outre a trader called Seth Grindley had been shot to death during a thunderstorm four nights ago. Seven thousand dollars' worth of peltry which

Grindley had been holding through the summer for better prices had been stolen; and an indeterminate amount of dust which the trader had amassed during that open season had also vanished.

To Alan it was clear, brutally clear, that the man who had robbed and shot Seth Grindley was the stranger whom he himself had met last evening at the Dunbar mouth. With heartless cunning that stranger had stolen his dust and then framed him. Though the fellow had got away from Lac L'Outre without leaving clue to his identity, he had evidently been afraid of the relentless Mounted. Meeting a friendly traveler who had been north in the mountains and knew nothing about the killing, the wilderness bandit had craftily shifted the murder guilt to his campfire acquaintance. After robbing the traveler of his dust, the man had slipped that fatal Mannlicher-Schoenauer into his rifle case, given him part of those stamped and incriminating furs, and cold-bloodedly sent him down river to his doom.

It was a superb frame-up, and it had worked superbly. For now the Police and all Lac L'Outre were confident that they had caught the murderer. They had dropped the hunt; were not even looking for the real killer.

Though Alan cursed them for believing him guilty, he himself scarcely blamed them, when he pushed his situation off and looked at it through *their* eyes. They had nothing to judge by except the facts, and those facts were damning. Against the deadly evi-

dence of that rifle and peltry, he had no alibi, for he had not seen a human being in weeks; he had no dust to prove what he'd been doing; he had no defense whatever except that flimsy story about a vague nameless stranger.

His helplessness maddened him. If only this trouble was something that he could fight! If only he could come to physical grips with it, as with an enemy or a river rapids! But he could not stir a hand to save himself. Like a package stamped "Murderer" and addressed "To the Gallows", he would be shunted helplessly this way and that, through a magistrate court, through jail, through a jury court, till he was delivered at a death cell, or — if he was lucky! — tossed into a pen for life.

And all this, he reflected, had avalanched upon him because of a chance meeting with a stranger. An accident, a sheer little accident such as might happen to anybody any day, was wrecking his whole existence.

As he brooded on this fact, the happy philosophy which he had spun that summer rose up and mocked at him. Master and molder of his destiny, was he? For five months he had slaved for that bit of dust, and then overnight it had changed to sand! In all his twenty-two years he had committed no offense against law or good conscience, yet here he lay in a cement-steel cell booked with the worst of crimes. Through accident!

His thoughts drifted down across the wilderness

latitudes to Edmonton, to the university; and he pictured the consternation that would burst upon the campus when folk there heard that "the Rambling Boulder" was on trial for a robbery and killing. His friends, his team-mates, would raise money for a defense lawyer. The university authorities would send character affidavits. But would that help much against all the hard-fact evidence pointing straight at his guilt?

A voice at the cell door broke into his bitter thoughts.

"Mr. Laramie ——"

He looked up, saw Joan Hastings in the corridor.

"Come over here, Mr. Laramie," she bade, in quick tones.

Wondering what she wanted, Alan got up and stepped over to the door.

As he confronted Joan Hastings, with the corridor light shining down upon her head and face, that tantalizing memory stirred again, stronger and more insistent. Though he still could not place her, he knew that in the trading station she had recognized him and that the recognition had hit her hard.

Struggling with that elusive memory, he recalled that last July a gossipy old prospector, who had hung around his "diggings" on the Grizzly for several days, had mentioned the Hastings girl at Lac L'Outre. Her mother had died a year ago, the old wilderness waif had said. Boyd Hastings, her

father, was drinking heavily, taking up with Indian women, sliding down and out fast. Against poverty and slander and cutthroat competition, Joan was putting up a valiant battle to keep the store afloat and bring her dad out of his slump. She was engaged to Corporal Norman, the old prospector had stated; and they were going to be married as soon as Norman got his sergeantcy.

Alan looked at Joan's small brown hand, resting on a bar of the door; but he saw no engagement ring on her finger.

"I heard your remark about curiosity-mongers, but I came anyway," Joan said. She was breathing hurriedly, as though from haste or excitement, but her brown eyes were steady. Altogether she was as cool and capable a person as Alan had ever come up against. "I'm here on business, not curiosity. I'm going to help you." She leaned nearer, pressing her face against the bars. "We must talk fast. I'm allowed only a minute or two, and that only because Eric Norman is — because he doesn't like to refuse a request from me."

"Talk — what about?" Alan demanded, suspicious. Level-eyed and inscrutable, the girl was a tight-lipped puzzling person, and he could not make her out. "Did Norman send you here to pump me, under cover of being friendly?"

Joan's swift answer took him like a smash between the eyes. "Listen! Tomorrow morning the Police are taking you down river to the Landing. I had

to act tonight or not at all. You don't dare go to trial. You haven't got a chance in a thousand. Everything is stacked against you. If you ever go to trial you'll be convicted, you'll be given a life term or — or hanged. Eric says so. *He* knows. You've got to escape. Tonight. Now. That's the one hope you've got, and if you pass it up you're *done*."

She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I couldn't stand aside and see you put to death or stuck in a pen all your life when I know that you're innocent. I couldn't bear it. I've been trying to think of ways to help you, but there wasn't any way, no way on earth except . . . *Here! Take this!*"

With a glance at Norman's office to make sure he was not looking, she thrust her hand through the bars and gave Alan a key.

"It's the key to this cell!" she whispered. "I stole it — while I was talking to Eric. I'll draw him out of the road somehow, long enough that you can slip away from here."

In a kind of daze Alan turned the key over and over in his palm, staring at the little metal thing which represented all the difference between freedom and imprisonment, between this smothering cell and the winds of the night, between life and death, even, for him.

He raised bewildered eyes to Joan Hastings.

"But — but why — why are you doing this for me?"

"I told you why — because you're innocent."

Her tones were sharp with conviction, and this puzzled Alan. "How do you know I am?" he demanded. "Look here — do *you* know who pulled this Grindley killing?"

"Why, that stranger you met!"

"Of course! But d'you know who he is?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Joan said; and Alan knew she was speaking with complete honesty. "I only know that he killed Mr. Grindley and then framed you."

"But even so, why are you taking all this risk onto yourself? I'm nothing to you."

"I've got reason."

"What reason?"

"Good heavens," Joan said impatiently, "we can't stand here talking about 'reasons'! Listen to me. Let *me* talk. I know what I'm doing. I'm going to get you out of this jail and see to it that you escape."

"But breaking jail — why, that'd clinch the evidence against me. Don't you see? I'd rather stay and fight the case. I've got friends and pull at the university —"

"To drag in your university connections would be the very worst thing you could do! All that the Police lack now in this case against you is a motive, an explanation of why you should have robbed Mr. Grindley. Your university explains it — beautifully! D'you know what Eric said to me, not five minutes ago? He said, 'Poor fellow, it's easy to see, Joan,

what led to his downfall. He had no money or job; September is almost over; he was desperate to return to school, especially when it was his last year and he was a star on three varsity teams; and so, when his accomplice suggested robbing a trading store, he fell in with the idea.' That's what Eric said and thinks! That's what a jury'll think!"

Alan slowly nodded. That's what a jury *would* think. The whole case against him — evidence, motive, everything — was iron-riveted. Joan was right; his salvation lay in breaking out of the law's clutch and making his getaway. Tonight. Tomorrow would be too late.

"What're you wavering about?" Joan queried.

"You," Alan said. "You'll get into trouble for helping me."

"I will not! I'm covering my tracks. Before I came here or made my first move, I thought this whole plan out carefully. It's airtight, if you do just as I say."

It occurred to Alan that perhaps Joan Hastings was helping him because of that previous encounter between himself and her. Perhaps that half-forgotten meeting, which he could not quite pin down, held the explanation of this strange visit.

"Look, girl! — you and I've met each other somewhere. You remember where and when, but I don't. Where was it? Tell me!"

"We don't dare waste time talking about that, either. It's of no importance anyway. You've got

to be out of this jail before one of those Mounted patrols comes back to Lac L'Outre, or you'll have three or four men guarding you instead of just one. Listen! — when I draw Eric out of this building, you unlock this door, slip through that window at the end of the corridor, circle west around the post, and come in to the river bank up at that first timbered headland. Have you got that straight?"

"Yes," Alan whispered back. "First timbered point. Then what?"

"I'll meet you there. I'll hold Eric as long as I can — to give you plenty time to get out of here; and then I'll come."

"And then what?"

"Leave that to me!" Hastily she squeezed his hand. "Good-by. Good luck. Don't muff this, Alan!"

Before Alan could stop her or voice a word of gratitude, she whirled away and hurried down the corridor to Corporal Norman's office.

As Eric Norman got up and courteously proffered her the comfortable chair at his desk, Joan felt intense shame at what she had just done. It seemed like downright treachery, like a betrayal of something precious — a man's love and trust.

Ever since he had come to Lac L'Outre as Officer Commanding of the Sulteena territory, Eric had been her good friend, her closest friend on earth. A very well-to-do man, he had offered to float her through college, had smoothed her rocky path in

countless small ways; and during the past year her association with him, a person of culture and education, had been her only refuge from the drabness of isolated Lac L'Outre, from her steadily deepening poverty and heavy responsibilities.

Now, in return for all his kindnesses, she had betrayed him. In stealing that key she had not only played treacherous with his friendship but likely had done serious damage to his standing in the Force. The escape of a murder prisoner would bring an immediate investigation from Division Headquarters. Right now that would be the worst kind of a blow to Eric. He had a sergeantcy hanging in the balance, and good chances of a coveted inspectorship on beyond that sergeantcy. Her act tonight might utterly kill that promotion. In the stern Mounted one bad slip, one mere suggestion of incompetence, and a man was done. And Eric had many enemies, ready to pounce upon the slightest mistake he made.

But in her heart this shame and conscience-hurt about Eric were altogether outweighed by the solemn duty that she owed to Alan Laramie. Honor and self-respect bound her to get Alan away from Lac L'Outre, at whatever danger to herself or cost to others, and to see that he made safety somewhere, beyond the farthest reach of the law.

Norman sat down on the edge of the desk and lit a cigarette.

"Well, dear, I observe that Laramie didn't bite

your head off. He almost did mine. What did you talk about?"

"I merely tried to cheer him up," Joan said casually. "He's awf'ly blue. By the way" — she raised her voice a little, so that Alan could hear her and take the hint — "he's all worn out, and I think he might fall off to sleep if you'd dim that corridor light."

"Not a bad idea. I wish he could drop off, poor lad."

He stepped down the corridor, lifted the kerosene lamp from its bracket; and Joan heard him say:

"Lie down and try to catch a bit of rest, Laramie, even if you can't sleep."

Alan took the hint — and more. Quick-wittedly he made a shrewd play for time to get miles away from Lac L'Outre before his escape was discovered.

"How the devil can a fellow rest," he snapped, from the cell, "when you're poking your face in at me every whip-stitch and letting these Sympathetic Susies come in and stare at me? Get out! Leave me alone."

"All right," Norman humored him. "I'll stay clear and you'll have no more visitors. If you want anything, call. Good night to you."

"And bedbugs to you," Alan growled; and Joan heard the creak of his cot as he stretched out on it.

As Norman brought the lamp into the office, a little thrill of elation went through Joan. The corridor was dark now; no one could see Alan slipping

through the west window; and it might easily be a full hour before Eric approached that cell again and discovered it was empty.

Norman smiled as he turned to her. "Well, there's a new name for you, Joan — 'Sympathetic Susie.' But you should have heard the names he called me this evening. That youngster can throw words like brickbats. He's not only the choicest fighter that I ever saw in action but a positive genius with hard language."

Toying with a letter knife, Joan tried to think of a way to get Eric out of that Police building for a few minutes. Norman thrummed on the desk, studied her, finally asked:

"Are you still convinced of his innocence, dear, after talking with him?"

"I am!" Joan said flatly. "There in the store I was face to face with him when he discovered that his gold was gone, and I know he wasn't play-acting. That stranger up the Sulteena robbed him, and that stranger is the man who robbed and killed Mr. Grindley."

Norman refused to argue the matter. With a glance at his watch he remarked, "Joan, it's ten-thirty, and you've had a long hard day. Hadn't you better be going home and to bed?"

In casual tone Joan requested, "Step across to the house with me, Eric. It's so dark outside, and there's a fog from the river."

"I can't possibly leave here, Joan." He handed

her a flashlight from the desk drawer. "Use this, dear."

The flash nonplused Joan. Thinking quickly, she played another card. "It's not so much the darkness," she said. "It's the danger of . . . There's a team of huskies prowling loose around the post tonight, and two of them snarled and sprang at me a little while ago. It'll only take you three minutes, Eric."

Norman shook his head reluctantly. "Really, I can't leave this building, Joan. If those men out there should see me go, three minutes would be quite long enough for them to slip in here and riddle Laramie with bullets, through that cell door. I'd have the distinction of having permitted the first and only mob killing that ever occurred in the Mounted."

He stepped across to his gun cabinet, selected a handsomely mounted revolver from his fine collection, broke it and loaded it, and came back to her.

"Take this with you, and don't be hesitant about using it on those huskies. It's against Police orders for dogs to be loose around a post."

For a moment Joan was completely at a loss what to do. Unless she drew Eric away from that building, Alan could not escape; and Eric refused to be drawn.

Ashamed of herself for doing so, she told an outright lie, made appeal to his chivalry. "Thanks,

Eric," she said, handing the gun back to him. "I'd rather not take this. I might be tempted to use it; and I — I don't want to shoot anybody."

"What's that? Why, what do you mean, dear?"

"If you must know, I'm afraid of those men out there, Eric. They're in an ugly mood tonight. They catcalled at me in the store; and when I was coming over here, that big Battu Ducharme, there by the fish staging . . . But I'll get back all right, I guess."

Norman picked up his hat. "Why didn't you tell me this in the first place? I'll go halfway with you and wait there till I see the light in your room."

He slipped his service gun into his holster, and took her out of the Police building into the foggy darkness.

As they walked up the path together, Joan wanted to free herself from Norman's arm about her waist; but she did not. He was doing her a kindness by seeing her safely home; and she could not repulse him while accepting a favor. But she hated to take any kindness whatever from Eric Norman. Every favor that he showed her added to her heavy debt to him. Every friendly act from him was like another nail in her — Was it as bad as that? A coffin? Marrying Eric? When he loved her so deeply and was so good a friend? When she respected and liked him so much?

She knew that she did not love Eric, at least not with the passion that should go with marriage; and so far she had fought off any definite engagement.

In the secrecy of her night thoughts she told herself that she must never, never give in. Yet there were other times, of discouragement and despair, when her rational mind told her that she was a supremely fortunate girl in having the chance to marry Eric Norman. From all the thwarting, dreary and hopeless circumstances which for a year had been closing in upon her with crushing weight, that marriage would free her instantly. It would give her sick shattered father a new grip on life. It would repay Eric for his loyal friendship.

Though she had held out until now, the events of the summer and fall had pushed her to the very edge of surrender. And now tonight . . . As she went up the dark path with Eric, she felt that tonight, the events which she was unleashing tonight, would make her marriage to Eric as certain as tomorrow's sunrise.

Thirty seconds after Joan and Norman left the Police building, Alan was out of the cell and stealing along the dark corridor.

He found the west window; opened it noiselessly, inch by cautious inch; eased himself through; hung one-handed while he closed the window; then dropped lightly — and his feet were on solid ground once more.

An exultation was running like high wine through his veins. By a miracle, the miracle of a girl's faith in his innocence, he was free, under the night sky;

and his destiny lay in his own hands again. With those wild ranges all around him and a hundred mountain streams beckoning as pathway for his canoe, he swore that Norman and the Mounted and the blundering law had seen their last of him.

Though he could not imagine what plan Joan had worked out for his escape, he knew that any plan *she* made would be shrewd and thorough.

Listening alertly for footsteps in the foggy dark, he started straight west from the Police building, to hit the woods back of the post and circle north to the headland, his place of rendezvous with Joan Hastings.

A hundred feet from the barracks he ran into the high-wired kennels where the Police dog teams were yarded. One of the savage huskies, nosing around the iron feeding pans, winded him, snarled, barked. Its kennel mates came pouring out of their boxes, began barking; and four other teams in adjoining yards took up the clamor.

Alan backed hurriedly away, swung to his right, and headed in the general direction of the Hastings store.

Halfway there he glimpsed two dim figures thirty steps from him, walking along the path; and as they passed between him and a light from a *métis* shack, he recognized them as Joan Hastings and Norman.

Alongside a rick of cordwood he stopped, waited. Almost at that same moment they too stopped,

stood there on the path, chatting. Watching them, he saw Norman glance repeatedly at the Police building; saw Joan's hand resting on the officer's arm, detaining him, spinning out those minutes to the utmost.

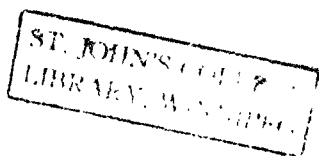
As Alan was about to hurry on, he heard the *pad-pad* of stealthy shoe-pacs, coming toward him; and out of the dark to his left loomed the shadowy figures of three men. He flattened himself to the ground, expecting them to go past. To his dismay they halted at the end of the rick and sat down on the wood, not ten feet from where he lay.

Against the background of the sky he made out who they were. One was the sharp-nosed trapper who had kicked him in the face; another was the squat Cree whom he had flung across the trading store; and the middle one was the huge 'breed who had tried to smash him with the belt-ax.

In his hands the big *métis* held some small object, like a corncob, and was working at it with a knife, while the other two bent their heads close and watched.

So near them that he dared not move an inch, Alan silently cursed the three. Heaven alone knew how long they would sit there palavering, wasting his precious minutes, working at that mysterious little object.

Turning his head cautiously, he glanced again at Joan and Norman. As he looked, he saw Joan stand tiptoe and kiss Norman and then start on up the



path alone, while the officer remained by the fish scaffold to watch till she reached home.

That kiss astonished and mystified Alan. What kind of a game was this Joan Hastings playing, anyhow — kissing one man and aiding another to escape? Yet he could not doubt her integrity of purpose toward himself. Not when she had just delivered him from that jail. She might kiss Eric Norman but she was helping Alan Laramie get away!

Her sharp-whispered sentence, "I've got reason!" rang in his ears yet. What reason? Her sympathy over the loss of his dust, her belief that he was the victim of a cruel frame-up — those might be partial explanations of her helping him, but not the whole explanation. Nor could her act be attributed to impulse. This level-headed girl did not do things impulsively.

At the Hastings home, just behind the trading station, a light appeared at a window. Alan saw Norman whirl on his heel and hurry back to the Police building.

"Charlie," the big 'breed whispered to the white man, "cut dat fuse *hiyu* short. T'ree inch is plenty. All I wan' is tam enough to drop dis steeck t'rough dat winner and get gone. 'Fore dat y'ong ceety debbil can get off hees cot — *pouff!* — he get blowed to hell lak bag of fedders."

Alan stiffened at the words, suddenly realizing what these three night-prowlers were planning. That

object was a dynamite stick. The big *métis* was affixing cap and fuse to it, and was going to toss it through the window of the Police butter-tub.

He laughed silently at the thought of that futile bellowing explosion; but then it dawned on him that Norman would speedily discover that the cell had been empty, the prisoner vanished. Within a few minutes thereafter the Police launch and searching parties would be out upon the river, hunting him. The hour of grace which he and Joan had maneuvered for would be cut almost to nothing.

The big *métis* crimped the mercury cap with his teeth and stuck it into the dynamite cartridge. "*Allons!* She ready for beezness. Charlie, you go 'round on de sout' side of dat building and watch sharp dat nobody come. Sheekooteemie, you crawl op close to Norman's winner and keep wan damn sharp eye on heem. I wait here. If anyt'ing is wrong, give me a whistle. *Allons!*"

As the Cree and the white man soft-footed away, Alan reached out and clasped a stick of wood, a heavy stick — He nursed a grudge against the huge 'breed for flashing that belt-ax and jumping upon him from behind.

"I'll give you a whistle, you big hunk," he thought.

Rising to a crouch so that he could throw, he poised himself, drew back his arm, flung the stick with all his strength.

The whirling missile caught the 'breed alongside

the head and felled him like a poled ox. Without a grunt he toppled from the rick and sprawled heavily on the ground.

Bending over his limp enemy, Alan groped for the dynamite cartridge, threw it away, and then vengefully slipped the Police key into the man's pocket, reasoning that the *métis* would puzzle about it, take it to Corporal Norman and not only get into trouble himself but divert suspicion from Joan.

He stood up, hurried on.

As he drew near the Hastings home, he looked at the window where the light had appeared, and caught a glimpse of Joan. She was lifting a rifle from a wall peg.

Carefully avoiding the shaft of light streaming from the window, he swung toward the house, thinking to meet Joan there instead of at the headland. A rod away he stopped behind a fur press. Joan had gone into some other part of the dwelling by then, but he saw at a glance that the room with the light in it was her room.

The bleakness of it, the poverty of it, tugged at Alan. A battered dresser with a cracked mirror, a narrow bed, a curtained-off corner where Joan hung her clothes, a little shelf of books, a small tin heating stove — that was all the furniture it had. On the split-log walls she had tacked up magazine pictures to relieve the bleakness, and above her bed hung a birchbark vase of flowers and bright red berries.

While he crouched at the fur press, a man came

into Joan's room, a man of only forty-five but prematurely gray and bent; and Alan knew that he was Joan's father, Boyd Hastings.

"Joan," the man called, in shaky voice, seeing that she was not there. He turned and went out, and from some other room Alan heard him call again, "Joan, honey ——"

To Alan there was an infinitely pathetic note in that call. It was the cry of a lost and wandering soul for the person whom he needed and on whom he leaned for strength and comfort.

Joan did not answer. Afraid that she had slipped out of the house unnoticed, Alan straightened up and headed for the river bank. . . .

On the timbered point he waited through slow-dragging minutes, in the blackness under the pines.

His first soaring exultation at being free had ebbed a bit, and he was beginning to realize that getting away from Lac L'Outre was only the first step and the easiest step in his escape. To get entirely away, entirely beyond reach of the Mounted — there was the rub. The Police knew who he was, and from Athabasca to the Canadian Yukon the Force would be on the alert for him. He could not possibly head south or east; in either direction he would run into a whole nest of Police detachments. If he cut straight west he would have a dozen mountain ranges to cross, and when he did reach western British Columbia he would still be in Mounted territory.

His only chance, as he saw it, was to hit north-

west for Alaska. The Panhandle was not terribly far; he would be traveling for the most part through country unfrequented even by Indians; and once across the Border he would be safe.

But even this flight to the northwest looked a dubious venture — a ten-to-one gamble at best. Most of the passes were snowed under by now; he had no winter outfit, no friend to turn to; and except for the main Sulteena valley he knew nothing whatever about that appalling wilderness up river.

But he had strong faith in Joan, who had snatched him away from the Police when all the rest of Lac L'Outre had failed; and he believed that her plan, whatever it was, would cut through these bristling obstacles. And with the blind confidence of youth, he had unlimited faith in his own powers too. A rifle, a canoe, a blanket, and a head start — that was all he asked.

As yet it had not come home to him that now he was an outlaw; that if he did escape he would be an outlaw all the rest of his years, uprooted from friends and university and the old life — a hunted man, living always in dread of a sudden hand upon his shoulder.

Up the river trail came hasty footsteps, the soft quick patter of a person moccasin-shod. The sound drew near the deerbush thicket where he crouched.

“Alan —— ?”

“Joan! Here!”

He sprang up and ran to meet her. In her arms Joan carried a rifle, blanket roll, a nest of camping utensils. He took them from her.

"Dads was awake; I had a hard time getting these and getting free," she panted. "Eric is back at the Police building. He might flip a flash into that cell any minute; and when he does . . . Here, this way ——"

Through the fog-dripping willows she led Alan out to the tip of the headland, where, in the black shadows of a water-edge balsam, a canoe lay half awash.

Alan noticed that the slim little craft was equipped with a light outboard, and that Joan had lugged to this rendezvous a ten-gallon drum of gas, a can of oil, two paddles, and a campfire kettle packed full of food.

The thoroughness of her job amazed him, even though he had expected such from her. That kicker in especial was a welcome sight. On the dash away from Lac L'Outre and out of immediate danger, it would speed him half a hundred miles in the time that he could paddle twenty; and after that, when he struck heavy portaging or needed to travel silently, he had only to dump it off.

"Gosh," he thought, remembering the poverty of her room, "I oughtn't to let her give me all this. A dollar must look as big as a wagon-wheel to her, and here's nearly three hundred dollars' worth of stuff!"

He stowed the rifle, blankets and outfit in the canoe, untied the craft, turned to Joan.

"I don't know why you've done all these things for me, girl," he said huskily. "Last night a stranger robbed and framed me; and tonight another stranger, you . . . But I don't want to think of you as a stranger, Joan. As soon as I make safety, I'll write you. The least I can do is to pay you back for this canoe and outfit. But I can't ever pay you for your help and your belief —"

"Let's talk about payment later," Joan interrupted. She stepped into the canoe, took up one of the paddles. "Right now we'd better be putting distance between us and Lac L'Outre. We'll have to paddle for two or three miles; we don't dare start the kicker till we're entirely out of hearing."

"*W-e?*" Alan gasped. Her cool announcement nearly bowled him over. "*We — ?*" he repeated, dazedly.

"I'm taking you up the river a piece and turning you over to an Indian up there," Joan said, matter-of-factly. "He'll give you an outfit and take you on to where you can make your way to the Panhandle."

The painter rope dropped from Alan's hands. "*You — going along?*" he stammered. "You don't really mean that?"

"Why, certainly! You couldn't possibly get through if I didn't go. You don't know the country, you couldn't find Luke Kaneewaugh, you just

wouldn't get anywhere. I know this upriver country like a book. Somebody's got to take you, and there's no one but me to do it. I can't trust anybody here at Lac L'Outre. I have to take you myself."

"But — but see here, you simply can't go, girl! I won't let you. It'd be as dangerous as all — I mean, it'd be dangerous. You'd be exposed to all kinds of risk. Think of the posses that'll be hunting me. And the rifle fights I may —— "

"There won't be any rifle fights if *I* take you. We'll slip through without a speck of trouble."

"I don't believe it! By tomorrow noon there'll be lookouts posted all the way north to the Forks. There'll be two dozen men gunning for me —— "

"That's precisely why I'm taking you. You'll have to travel by night, and how can you do that when you don't know the country? I might as well have left you back there in that cell as to let you start north by yourself."

Alan wavered. As far as his own welfare was concerned, her plan did indeed look good to him. She knew the river and could get him away from Lac L'Outre in a hurry. This Indian of hers could outfit him and guide him across those jumbled ranges. Through the obstacles between him and Alaska her plan cut like a sharp sword.

But *her* welfare — that was a different proposition.

"You'd get into trouble with the Mounted, girl," he objected. "Ugly trouble. Helping a murder pris-

oner break jail and get away — that's a prison term."

"They'll have to *prove* I helped you. And they'll be a long time doing that!" She stamped her small foot with impatience. "Don't argue! Why don't you listen to me? I got you out of that jail, didn't I? D'you think I'd be wanting to go if I didn't absolutely have to?"

"You've run enough risk for me already," Alan said firmly. He stepped into the lapping wavelets, picked her up, lifted her out of the canoe and stood her on the gravel. "You're not going, and that's that!"

For a moment Joan struggled to free herself and clamber back into the canoe; but then she ceased, looked up at Alan, and her hand went up to his shoulder.

"Alan, listen to me," she said, and her deadly-serious tones carried more weight than her hot impatient argument. "You think you know the straight of things here at Lac L'Outre. You don't, Alan. You know only the surface facts. You don't know the half of what you're up against. Won't you take my word for that? And when I say I've got to go along with you, won't you take my word for that, too?"

Alan had no answer to her plea, for the simple reason that he had not the faintest idea of what she was driving at. What did she mean by "surface facts"? Maybe he didn't know what he was up against. *She* evidently knew.

From her expression, "the straight of things here at Lac L'Outre", he gathered that something portentous had exploded at this little river post; something beyond a robbery and killing; something that he was entirely ignorant of.

As he stared at Joan's upturned face in the darkness, the notion flitted across his mind that she had some personal stake in his get-away. Sympathy and friendliness simply did not explain.

While he debated about letting Joan go along, he heard a confused shouting from the direction of the post. He whirled around, peered through the trees, saw lights moving, twinkling — men with lanterns — about the Mounted Police building.

"Lord above!" he breathed. "Norman has discovered I'm gone. They're looking for me, Joan. That big hunk of half-and-half must've come to and spread the alarm."

Joan stepped into the canoe. "Shove off — if you're done arguing. We'll slip them. They can't find us in this river fog."

Alan glanced once more at the post, where the hue and cry was on for him, and once more at Joan. "You seem to know what you're doing," he said, "and that's a darned good thing because I sure don't!" He pushed the canoe from the gravel and swung into it. "Okay. If you've got to go, let's be traveling."

They seized their paddles, skirled out upon the dark water, and headed up stream.

Chapter Three

IN the cold gray dawn of the next morning they swung into the mouth of the Dunbar River, fifty miles north of Lac L'Outre; and went ashore, tired and chilled from their all-night run.

A gray water-smoke curling up from the cold Sulteena hung like a blanket over the river and reached halfway up to timberline. The trees dripped with it, and one could see only a rod or two across the water. Exceptionally heavy that night, the fog had several times nearly brought their light canoe to grief on rock and floating log, but also it had kept the speedy Police launch at home and given them a long start and a clean get-away.

As their hiding place for the day Alan selected a dense tangle of mossy rocks where he and Joan had view of both the Dunbar and Sulteena.

There he carried the canoe and their belongings.

Hurriedly they built a small fire, while a fire was still safe, and had a warm breakfast — fried bacon, scones dipped in bacon grease, tea from Joan's kettle.

Afterward Joan, girl-like, took comb and towel and vanity case, and went back into the pines to a little mountain torrent. For this wilderness trip she had put on a woods outfit last night — moccasins, a belted suit of blue corduroy, a leather jacket, a red tam. That tam intrigued Alan. He had seen it before, somewhere; had seen Joan wearing it; had seen her walking along in the sunshine with that red tam at a brave jaunty angle on her head.

After pouring water on their fire so that there would be no smoke for a sharp eye to catch and no odor for a keen-nosed Cree to detect, Alan stepped down to the timbered point where that glint-eyed stranger had robbed and framed him, night before last.

For twenty minutes he searched that old camp site for any clues which the man might have left. But he found none. He had scarcely expected to find any. Like an evil shadow that stranger had come walking into his fireglow, and like a shadow he had vanished again. Whoever he was, wherever he might be, he was safe now. No one suspected him or was looking for him. The whole man-hunt had shifted to another person.

Back at camp he chased away a family of raucous whisky-jacks that were quarreling at him and Joan,

brought water to last till evening, and slashed off some balsam branches to spread their blankets on.

The sun finally inched above the towering eastern range; the river fog vanished; and an Indian Summer day, lazy and beautiful, spread over the mountains like a benediction. The hardwoods across the Sulteena were in full autumn color; and a pearly-gray haze from distant forest fires hung in the air. The waterfowl, smitten with the migration restlessness, were winging nervously up and down the streams, flocking together for their long flight south.

Alan poured two last cups of tea for Joan and himself and leaned back against a mossy boulder. This was his first chance to speak an unhurried word with Joan Hastings, and he vowed he was going to clear up some of the puzzles that were tormenting him. With an eye down river for that scarlet-and-gold Police launch, he demanded:

"Joan, look here — I want to know where you and I bumped into each other before."

She told him readily, with no attempt at concealment. "I went to the University of Alberta for two years. I saw you there, many times. You undoubtedly saw me, too, around on the campus. Just a passing glance — that's why you remembered me but couldn't recall where."

"*You* — went to Alberta?" He was astounded. "Blue blazes, I never suspected — But yes, I did, I did suspect something! I thought there was something funny about you, reading Greek there in that

trading station. And you looked all out of place — above it, above that muskrat talk and small-potato chin-chabber. But it's queer that you recognized me snip-snap and I didn't you. I can't hook you up with the university even now."

"It's not queer at all. You were a campus celebrity, 'the Rambling Boulder', whereas I was merely an inconspicuous, ah, honor student."

"Hmm!" Alan said. He tore off a birch twig, chewed on it, watched a wisp of hair that was playing against Joan's cheek. "Now I'm beginning to *kumtux* things. You knew I was a college person, on the teams, with a bit of a reputation — that's why you knew I didn't have anything to do with this Grindley killing."

"That is *not* why," Joan corrected. "A college person and athletic star can be a criminal just like anybody else."

Alan's bewilderment flooded back upon him. "Then how *did* you know I was innocent?"

Joan hesitated a moment. "I hate to say. You'll think it was absurd. But . . . All right, I'll tell you. Do you remember the girl who was night cashier at the Campus Inn during our freshman and sophomore years?"

"You?"

Joan nodded. "I worked for part of my expenses. Dads was beginning to have a hard time even then, with fur prices down to nothing."

"What about this night-cashier business?"

"You came in there one evening and bought something, and I gave you too much change. A nickel too much. You handed back that nickel. You didn't say anything — the manager was standing there close and you didn't want to draw his attention to my mistake. You just handed me the coin and walked out."

"Good grief! — remembering an absurd thing like that," Alan snorted, thinking of his athletic exploits in comparison.

"I knew you'd call it absurd! But it isn't. The instinctive way you handed back that nickel showed me that you were not only honest by nature but thoughtful of other people's welfare. You didn't hesitate or make any display; you just returned the coin as naturally as a person draws a breath. Always after that I knew that you were as honest as daylight."

Alan looked meditatively at a distant mountain top. "Hmm! A nickel. A fellow's luck turning on a thin Canadian nickel," he said, and his tones were edged with bitterness. "Another one of these damnable accidents. It happened to be in my favor this time, but it was pure accident just the same."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Alan refused, and lapsed into a moody silence.

Joan plucked at a birch-paper curl and studied him. She might have added that she had kept that memorable nickel and still had it, treasuring it as

a memento of Alan Laramie. From a distance and in a quite impersonal way she had watched "the Rambling Boulder" and idealized him, during her two Edmonton years. She was not much taken by his athletic prowess, but his strong virility did fascinate her; and his maturity and self-reliance put him at great contrast to most of the young men of the campus. He was totally free from the collegiate boredom and cynical flippancy which blighted so many students, especially the intelligentsia of the student body. A weird mixture of naïveté and brilliance, he was straightforward, awkward, genuine.

It seemed to her that college meant profoundly more to Alan Laramie than merely a place to learn a money-making profession. He appeared to be floundering around, uncertain of his aims, not taking the first easy path that proffered but groping painfully toward some worth-while and idealistic goal. Delicious uncertainty, delicious floundering! — when most of his classmates were already settling complacently into the grooves which they would keep for the rest of their lives.

"Joan," Alan said — he had snapped out of his moodiness and was looking again at her — "I can believe this nickel business, all right; but still I don't *kumtux* why you felt called on to help me break jail back there at Lac L'Outre."

"Would *you* let an innocent person be railroaded?"

"You've got some other motive," he asserted.

"I haven't," Joan denied. But she did not meet his eyes as she said this.

"I know you have! Remember last night? Remember what you said about 'surface facts'? What were you driving at?"

"I had to tell you something, didn't I?" Joan parried. "You'd have argued till morning."

Alan knew she was not speaking the truth. Over and beyond the fact that they were fellow-collegians and that she believed him innocent, she had some personal motive in helping him on this flight. She was leaving something *unsaid*.

Vexed at her for keeping him in the dark, he was on the point of saying, "Look here, girl — if you've got some private game on the board and are using me as a pawn in it, I don't cotton to the idea." But then he saw how unjust the notion was, and he disowned it. Regardless of what her secret motive might be, the fact remained that he stood in tremendous debt to her. He owed her his freedom, likely his life. When the hand of everyone was against him, she had plucked him from that mantrap, and now was helping him get away.

Afraid that he would offend her if he probed any deeper, he said nothing more. She had a silence about her like the silence of her native mountains, and one climbed slowly to her confidence.

Downstream a little cloud of bluewings came wheeling around a pine headland. Their bullet-swift flight, low over the water, told Alan that the

teal had been flushed and rather badly scared by something on down river.

In a few moments he and Joan heard a throaty drone far-away south—the drone of the Police launch.

He sprang up, glanced around their refuge, made sure that nothing white or conspicuous was visible.

“Better hide that tam, partner,” he suggested. “A Timber Cree could spot that a mile off. Deer hunters wear red headgear so’s they can see to shoot each other. You oughtn’t to have worn a red tam like that.”

“I didn’t have any other tam—or hat,” Joan confessed.

Alan could have kicked himself for drawing out of her that admission of poverty. He tried to retrieve his blunder. “Why, that red won’t matter. We’ll be traveling mostly at night. I think it’s a cute tam.”

Down at the headland the big scarlet-and-gold launch came skidding around the bend at a dangerous keel, straightened out, skimmed up toward them.

On the bow deck Eric Norman stood wide-legged, searching ahead with a pair of binoculars. A Mounted constable, with hat pulled low over his eyes, sat tensed at the wheel, driving the launch at full gun up the river. In the rear a second Mounted constable was guarding five light paddle-canoes that were lashed crosswise on the stern deck.

Amidships, with a battery of rifle barrels sticking

above the gunwales, sat fourteen other men, several Crees and 'breeds among them, shielding their eyes from the spray and scanning the river banks that went swimming by.

Unconsciously Alan and Joan crouched lower behind their rock, though they were securely hidden.

"How d'you suppose Norman caught on to the direction we took?" Alan asked, watching the approaching launch.

"He's nobody's fool. He guessed."

"From the looks of his young army and the way they're loaded for bear, a person would think that he sort of wants to get me again."

"It'll be calamity to him if he doesn't."

"And worse calamity to me if he does! But what's he got at stake?"

"Just about his whole career in the Mounted," Joan explained. "The higher-ups at Regina are deciding on his sergeantcy in November. If you escape he'll never land it. There's a lot of jealousy in this Division against Eric because he's wealthy."

Alan pictured her standing tiptoe last night to kiss Norman, and he tried to reconcile that kiss with what she had just said. Her tones and whole attitude indicated plainly that she did not love Eric Norman; but just as plainly Norman was her very close and cherished friend. Yet she had deliberately done something which stood fair to wreck the man's career! She must have been driven to her act by a force that outweighed even the closest friendship.

What force? A simple explanation would be that she knew who had killed Seth Grindley and was trying to shield the man. But she did *not* know. In spite of her wide acquaintance with the people of Sulteena territory, she had no idea who that glint-eyed killer could be.

As the launch approached the Dunbar mouth, it slowed down, circled twice in midstream to kill its speed, dropped off a canoe and a man, and then skimmed on up Sulteena.

Bobbing and tossing in the waves left by the launch, the canoe headed in to the east bank, straight toward Joan and Alan. With dismay they watched the man land, a scant hundred yards from them, carry his canoe into a deerbush thicket and take up his lookout there at the juncture of the two rivers.

"See here, you fly-in-our-ointment," Alan apostrophized the sentry, "you 'tend to your own business and don't come exploring in this direction, or you'll *float* back to Lac L'Outre, and you won't need a canoe either!"

After a little time they got used to him, used to talking in whispers; and his presence did not bother them except that they worried how they were going to get away that evening.

Moving cautiously, they spread their blankets and lay down, to catch some sleep.

Their long cramped hours in the canoe, their night without rest, the worry and strain of constant

alertness, the throbbing monotone of the kicker's *chug-gg chug-gg*, had fagged them both; and it was good to stretch out comfortably, with the mountain solitude around them and the mellow sun falling in a warm golden splash upon their blankets.

High overhead an eagle circled in and out through a fleecy cloudlet, and faintly its screaming *chak chak chak* came drifting down. Tiny flame-colored warblers peeked at them, scolded a bit, flew away. A dapper chipmunk ventured from his rock-slit and ate the crumbs from their breakfast scones. A grunty porcupine came waddling past, sniffed wishfully at the salt odor of their bacon, but moved on — at Alan's invitation; and they laughed at his phlegmatic *ugh-ugh ugh-ugh* as he waddled out through the woods.

Toward mid-morning, wondering why Joan had been silent for the last half hour, Alan glanced at her and saw that she had fallen asleep. The tinkle of water from the mountain torrent, the low deep murmur of the two rivers, and the warm quiet of their hiding place, had proved too much for her.

He himself was drowsy, but he kept awake. The sentry down yonder had got restless and was poking around in the woods to pass the dull hours; and there was danger that he might come back as far as their refuge.

Propped on an elbow, Alan studied the sleeping girl, scarcely believing that he could have been on the same campus with her for two years with-

out becoming acquainted. How brown and lustrous her hair was! And what long dreamy eyelashes!

As he gazed at her, his former impression that she was an aloof and unawakened girl came back strongly; and now he was glad. Eric Norman had not awakened her. Though he had only conjecture to go by, he mistrusted the relationship between her and Norman. She seemed to feel under crushing obligation to the Mounted officer. Hopelessly in debt to him. And Norman loved her. That was a bad combination. And she needed money so desperately, for herself and her dad; and Norman was wealthy. That was bad, too.

Afraid that she might get chilly, he spread a light blanket over her, then made a pillow of another and slipped it under her head. Joan did not stir. As Alan bent over her he was strongly tempted to touch his lips to her cheek, partly in token of his deep gratitude and partly for quite a different reason. But then he thought: "It 'ud be a low-down trick, fellow. You're the person she said was as honest as daylight! If you can't kiss her when she's awake, don't do it when she's sleeping."

He contented himself with tucking that stray wisp of hair behind her ear.

It seemed strange to him that Joan should be living at that isolated river settlement when she wanted so badly to go back to the university. Any girl with the verve and push to run a trading station all by herself could easily make her own way at

Edmonton. He believed that she must be staying at Lac L'Outre because of her father, Boyd Hastings. She seemed to have depths and depths of affection for the shattered broken man. Over their breakfast she had mentioned how "Dads" used to take her, as a little girl, on his *en derouine* trips through the Sulteena country; how he had sent her to school at the Landing; how he had taught her to hunt and shoot and lope the brush. The mere inflection of her voice when she said "Dads" spoke of a fine comradeship.

Now that affection had caught her. She was standing loyally by her dad, but at immense cost to herself.

"Poor kiddy," he mused, "you sure are hoeing a tough row, what with fighting Norman off and holding up your dad and making a living." He knew that her isolation in a man's rough frontier world must go hard with her. In his experience practically all the girls and women at wilderness-buried places in the North were poignantly dissatisfied. The men had outdoor pursuits — hunting, trapping, fishing, whatnot — to which they took naturally; but their womenfolk had pitifully little of the more social and gentle activities which they by nature cherished. Small wonder that they turned wistful eyes toward the southern cities and daydreamed of sometime living there.

Near two o'clock that afternoon Joan stirred and woke and sat up, rubbing her eyes, wondering for

a moment where she was. Then she saw Alan sitting against a rock, with the rifle in his lap. He was yawning, and his eyes were droopy.

"Alan!" she reproached. "You let me sleep all day and didn't get any sleep yourself!"

"I've been keeping an eye on that Disturbing Element down there," he said. "He's taking a nap himself now. Has been all afternoon. Guess the excitement at Lac L'Outre kept him awake all night."

Joan looked around. "Where's our canoe? And our outfit?"

"I sneaked 'em out to that torrent and down to the river edge, a while ago. They're hid in some buckbrush up the shore. Figured I ought to do that while this Rip Van Winkle yonder was sawing wood. I didn't take the kicker. It's cached right back of you — it and the drums. We won't dare use a motor any more. We'll have to travel silent from now on."

They ate the cold left-overs of their breakfast. Afterward, at Joan's insistence, Alan lay down, thinking to doze a little. . . .

A hand on his arm woke him, hours later.

"Alan," Joan was whispering, "maybe we'd better be starting."

Night had come. It was dark in the little tangle, so dark that Alan could barely see Joan beside him; and the chill damp fog was sifting through the pines.

Down at the river bank the campfire of the lone watcher burned cheerily, as he cooked supper.

They dared cook none themselves, with him so close. Hungry and shivering, they rolled up their

blankets, groped out to the torrent, slipped down the ravine to the landwash, and hurried up the shore to the buckbrush thicket.

A few minutes afterward they had set their canoe to water, stepped in, and were paddling on up the gray ghostly Sulteena, without benefit now of the friendly little kicker.

At midnight, three nights later, they reached Sulteena Forks, a hundred miles north of Lac L'Outre.

To their left the Teluwaceet River led westward into the snow-capped Teluwaceet Mountains. To their right the beautiful Lynette stretched eastward into a jumble of lesser ranges. Straight ahead the Sulteena, master river of all that country, led north-northwest toward the Yukon height-of-land.

In midstream just below the Forks, where the clashing currents of the three rivers shifted back and forth, Alan stopped to reconnoiter, suspecting that this strategic point was tightly guarded and patrolled.

So far, by holing up in the daytime and traveling only during the dark hours, like two young river phantoms, he and Joan had escaped detection. But Corporal Norman had flung his whole hunt upstream, and it was boiling all around them — a grim and determined man-hunt. Twice the Police launch had returned to Lac L'Outre and brought up more men, more canoes. Posses were combing the river at night; lookouts had been posted at every narrows

and headland; and canoes on silent patrol passed them in the foggy dark like hostile wraiths.

They knew that they had Norman guessing as to their exact whereabouts and that they must keep him guessing. If they were ever glimpsed, the scattered hunt would draw together, bottle them up, end their flight.

Never knowing when he would run headlong into a rifle battle, Alan had begged Joan repeatedly not to go on with him. It would have been easy enough for her to get off on an island and wait for some canoe to pick her up. But Joan flatly refused to listen. Without telling him why, she took the position that it was her *duty* to help him escape, and that her duty would end only when he and Luke Kaneewaugh were across the Teluwaceet watershed and well on their way to the Alaska demarcation.

Alan hated to think of her returning to Lac L'Outre and facing the music there. Though there was no legal evidence against her, everyone would know that she had gone with him on this wilderness hegira. The talk about her in that little settlement would be vicious. And Eric Norman, to whom she owed so much — she would have to face Norman too.

But he could not deny that from the standpoint of his safety Joan had been dead right in coming along with him. Without her intimate knowledge of every bend and narrows of the Sulteena, he could scarcely have made five miles a night, and then at

infinitely greater risk. And her company also was a bulwark to him. A person of tremendous ups and downs, he found Joan's steady even temperament a solace and refuge. With a murder charge behind him and the outlaw's lone trail ahead, he would have fallen into a bottomless dejection except for her.

Despite their hunted existence and the hardships they endured, those three days and nights had not been unhappy. Theirs was an eager joyous partnership. Being fellow-fugitives gave them a sense of closest communion; they had much in common; and they struck it off well together. In the daytime they talked for hours on end, when they should have been sleeping; they quarreled over nothing and laughed over less; and at nightfall they set out on their dangerous travel with light hearts and buoyant confidence.

But to Alan their swiftly unfolding companionship brought uneasy pain-shot thoughts. The very happiness of his hours with Joan Hastings carried a pang. More and more he was dreading the time when he would say *Klahowya* to his girl partner, somewhere in the western Teluwaceets. Hitherto his interest in girls had been very casual. By and large he had disdained them — they were capricious and unpredictable creatures, and they took up too much of a fellow's time and thoughts, if you paid much attention to 'em. But Joan wasn't like those other girls. He wouldn't ever meet another partner, another girl, like her.

What Joan felt toward him he did not know. She was so silent, so unfathomable. He knew she liked him, found his company enjoyable; but deeper than that he could not read. . . .

Her promise to take him through the man-hunt "without a speck of trouble" had seemed an impossible job, at the outset; but so far she had done just that. She had brought him a hundred miles safely; and in a few miles more they would be through the worst.

If they could get past Sulteena Forks and a little distance up Teluwaceet River, the storm center of the hunt would lie behind them. Most of Norman's men were searching and watching the Sulteena; and his headquarters camp, they felt sure, was located at this strategic Forks just ahead.

There was no moon that night, and the river fog was fairly heavy; but the stars were bright, and against the light background of the water a canoe was distinguishable at a hundred yards.

As they held their craft steady in the shifting currents, Alan caught a whiff of smoke, campfire smoke. Noting the direction of the slight wind, he peered at the headland between the Teluwaceet and Sulteena; and through the water-mist he made out a dull reddish glow, well back in the timber. The big glow of a big camp.

"Our guess was a bull's-eye, partner," he said, *sotto voce*. "Yonder's their main hang-out. I can smell 'em! What're we going to do? D'you think

it's safe to angle on into the mouth of the Teluwa-ceet? I'll bet a leg, I'll bet *both* legs, that they're patrolling all three of these river mouths —— ”

“*Sh-h-h*” — a sudden warning from Joan. She turned, seized his hand. “Look!” She pointed through the mist to their left. “Look there! What’s that? It’s too high out of water for a drift log, and it’s moving *across* the current!”

Alan glanced along her outstretched arm and saw a big shadowy mottle on the water, almost at the limit of vision.

“Canoe!” he breathed. “And headed in our direction!” He dipped paddle and started backing away. “Maybe they haven’t seen us.”

A cautious voice, a half-breed’s voice, came across to them. “Dat you, Battu?”

Alan’s heart missed a beat. For a second or two he was stunned. Then:

“*Ou’ ou’*,” he replied, muffling his voice and grunting as he imagined the huge Battu would grunt.

“*Froid, hein?*” the voice came again.

“*Ou’ ou’*.”

Under his powerful backstroke the canoe shivered. The shadowy mottle was almost lost to sight now.

“*Les deux petits, Battu — les avez-vous vus?*” the talkative *métis* inquired.

Alan whispered to Joan, “That’s over my head. What does it mean? Quick! What shall I tell him?”

“Say ‘*Rien du tout.*’”

“*Rien du tout,*” Alan called back.

With half a dozen more strokes he shook the enemy canoe and was swallowed up in the fog.

At a safe distance back downstream he and Joan held conference. One fact was clear — the mouth of the Teluwaceet was blocked. They dared not try to go up mid-channel; they had just escaped one canoe by a narrow shave, and doubtless several other craft were patrolling that mouth. Nor did they dare try to slip through by keeping close to shore. If a lookout was posted in the black shadows of some water-edge tree, he could spot them easily and they could not see him at all.

"We'll have to portage around this forks," Joan said. "We can. There's a sort of trail, a short cut for dog teams in winter. They won't be watching that. We'll tote around this place and hit the Teluwaceet a mile up."

They nosed in to the west shore, landed on a flat shelving rock where they would leave no tracks, and found the dim path that Joan remembered.

"You lead, I'll do the toting," Alan bade. He padded his shoulder with a blanket and heaved up the canoe, with packs, rifle and all their belongings in it.

Almost feeling their way in the darkness, they headed into the woods.

It was a long hard tote. The old path led them tortuously through deerbush thickets, around wind-fall tangles, through drogues of black spruce, across

rushing ice-cold torrents. They were three hours making that single mile.

When they did hit the Teluwaceet and floated their canoe, they were tired, hungry, wet, and felt like holing up for the day; but they wanted to put distance between themselves and that main camp at the Forks, and they hurried on.

It made them feel immensely good to know that their worst gauntlet was safely run and that they were lined away at last for their goal. Every mile now was a mile of lessening danger. Every paddle stroke took them nearer that great V-notch in the Teluwaceets through which Alan would pass to safety.

And Luke's cabin was not far now. They could reach it in two nights at the most; and thereafter the wise old Indian would be of inestimable help to them.

The earliest gray of dawn caught them at the lower end of a broad river-widening, five miles long and dotted with little wooded islands. Instead of stopping at the first hint of day, as they had been doing, they pushed out upon the lake, planning to whip ashore at the upper end of it. The venture looked safe enough. The lake fog was exceptionally heavy, the sky had clouded over, and dawn was slow in coming. Impatient at having wasted almost half the night at the Forks, they wanted to spin out their travel as long as they could.

Dead in the center of the lake they ran into dis-

aster. With the magic suddenness of an apparition a canoe sprang out of the gray fog, straight in front of them and not fifty feet distant. Caught unawares on the open water, they had not the slightest chance to back away or whip to cover of an islet near-by.

With one glance at the canoe and the three men in it, Alan grabbed for his rifle, to smash the wind-water line of the craft with a magazine of bullets and sink the canoe.

Joan stopped him. "Don't! They're Waukootannahs, from away west. I know them. Wait! Maybe they haven't heard anything about this hunt for us."

Her quick guess proved right. As the birchbark craft skimmed near, the Waukootannahs made no hostile move. Half-naked, wild-looking fellows, they sat motionless, like three gingerbread statues, staring at the white man and girl as surprisedly as the latter were staring at them.

"They're on the way to Lac L'Outre for their winter supplies," Joan whispered. "They don't know about us. Don't start trouble. They're from a non-treaty band and they've got a bad reputation."

"But they've *seen* us!" Alan groaned. "They'll tell Norman where we are."

"We can't help that now."

The birchbark slid past. All three of the Waukootannahs recognized Joan. One of them lifted a hand to her, grunted "How!" and smirked at her in a way that roiled Alan.

Once past, they dipped their paddles again, but the encounter had surprised them so much that they twisted their heads around, owl-like, and stared back as they paddled.

Alan came to life. Those three Smokies had to be halted. At the rate they were traveling they would be at the Forks in two hours, telling Eric Norman all about Joan and him. By mid-morning the Police launch would reach this lake; Joan and he would be stopped, cornered; all those thirty-five or forty men would be concentrated on this little strip of river, ferreting them out.

"Hold it!" he called at the rapidly vanishing canoe. He held up his hand, made them a gesture to wait. "Want to talk to you. Palaver. *Wa-wa*."

He spun his canoe around and headed toward them.

"What're you going to do?" Joan demanded, in frightened tones.

"Lots! If I don't, they'll do us plenty bad medicine before the morning's out."

"You let them alone, I tell you! They're dangerous. One of them's a killer ——"

"So am I! You handle this canoe, I'll handle those three."

The Waukootannahs waited. Joan guided alongside, as Alan directed her. A close-up glance at the long-bladed skinning knives and primitive little axes that the three carried at their belts convinced Alan that they were indeed ugly customers. The old-

est one especially was a murderous-looking fellow.

They eyed Alan suspiciously as the two canoes scraped together; but he had set his rifle against the middle thwart out of his reach, he was unarmed, and so he caught them napping.

"*Mika mamook siwash wa-wa, hunh?*" he inquired, resting his hand innocently on the gunwale of their craft.

They nodded that they did understand Chinook.

Alan's fingers tightened upon the gunwale, and he braced his foot against a thwart. The oldest Indian, perhaps because he had sometime worked that same *coup* himself, saw the move, guessed what was coming, and grabbed for his belt-ax.

He was a split-second too late. With a quick push down and then a sudden upward yank, Alan flopped the birchbark completely over and tumbled the three Waukootannahs headlong into the lake.


They came up spluttering, gasping, clutching at their canoe. One of them tried to right it. With the butt of his rifle Alan smashed two gaping holes in the craft.

The oldest Indian seized the prow of Alan's boat, lifted himself up breast-high, and started again to drag out his belt-ax; but Alan pried the fellow's hand loose and pushed him under the water.


With his rifle he motioned at the wooded islet. "*Hyack!*" he ordered. "*Nika shoot-stick mamook boom-boom!*"

They stopped grabbing for his canoe and struck out for the islet, as he ordered.

They were poor swimmers, like most natives of the cold-water North. Two of them managed to thrash and wallow across those fifty yards to the shallows, but the oldest one made hardly a rod before he began yelling for help. Alan shoved the canoe up close and towed him in to where he could wade.



Chapter Four



IN their rain-wet camp at the head of the lake, he and Joan kept listening for the drone of the scarlet-and-gold launch. The hours passed, and the big boat did not come.

"I guess your medicine worked, Alan," Joan admitted, as they ate some cold scraps of food at noon. "Those three must still be marooned down there on that island."

Alan nodded. Either the Waukootannahs did not know how to build a raft without spikes or *babische*, or else they were afraid to try the choppy lake on one. Likely they would stay marooned till some canoe came past and rescued them. But they were so near the big camp at the Forks that it was only a question of time, a day or two at the most, till a canoe would pass.

Whenever he thought of the encounter with those

three, he swore savagely at himself for letting Joan come along on this flight. Until that day there had been no court-sure proof against his girl partner, but now she was definitely in trouble with the law. Those Waukootannahs had seen her *with him*; they harbored plenty grudge and would blab to everyone; and not even Eric Norman could shield her.

Accident had reached out its cruel hand and touched her too.

"Stop worrying about me, Alan," Joan bade him, as they huddled together under their blanket pup tent that afternoon. "If we can only reach Luke, and you two can get across the watershed, I won't care about a little jail sentence."

"Well, *I* care!" he retorted. "You've got troubles enough now without going to jail or the pen, to boot. And for my sake — that's what burns me up. And I can't help you a bit. I'm hog-tied hand and foot. Can't do a cursed thing about it."

"You can get away," Joan said. "You'll be doing a tremendous lot for me if you do that, Alan. And I believe now that we're going to make it. We're through the worst; we're almost in the clear."

Her attempt at encouragement left Alan glum and cold. Until this last week the word "outlaw" had always connoted to him some glamorous personage who led an adventuresome and enviable life; but since that hectic evening at Lac L'Outre he had gradually realized what the word meant in blunt

fact. It meant being chased by Smokies and half-breeds. Meant a constant fear of arrest and jail. Meant a hobo existence, pick-and-shovel work, and association with human riffraff. When he passed through that V-notch on westward, his old world would cease to be, Alan Laramie would cease to be, his friends and education and eager ambitions would all cease to be. And so would Joan. He would never dare come back, could never see her again. He would be cut off from her as utterly as though he had died. . . .

At dusk that evening they pushed on. The night was pitch-dark, with a windy rain beating down; they had little fear of being spotted by a lookout; and they made a long strike, the longest and hardest of their whole trip.

The Teluwaceet, climbing fast toward its height-of-land, was dwindling rapidly and changing from a quiet blue river to a broken mountain stream. Near eleven o'clock they came to their first portage, a stretch of white water. It was a short stretch, only fifty yards, but big enough to stop that Police launch. The pursuit on above, if pursuit did come, would have to be by paddle-canoe.

In the dark hours following, the portages came thick and fast; but most of them were easy totes, and Joan knew the paths. It was a marvel to Alan how she could hit those landings in the rainy blackness and lead him across those tote trails so unerringly.

Just before dawn they reached the cabin of the lone Indian, Luke Kaneewaugh.

Afraid that one of Norman's men might be stationed there, they nosed ashore below the regular landing, circled back through the woods, and tip-toed up to the place.

The cabin door stood open. They peered inside, but in the blackness they could see nothing. At the door they listened closely but heard no one breathing.

As they puzzled what to do, a dark figure appeared beside them — at their very elbows before they knew he was about.

"Luke!" Joan cried. "You — you scared us! Luke, are you alone here?"

The Indian said something to her in his native tongue. She turned to Alan.

"Yes, he is, thank heaven! He says he *knew* I'd bring you to him. He's been watching for us, down there at his canoe landing, for three whole nights!"

"How'd he find out anything about the hunt, back in this no-man's country?"

"Constable Clancy was here and told him. Clancy is posted at that narrows four miles down. Remember? — we saw a fireglow there, under an overhang."

She turned again to the Indian, plied him with questions, listened to his slow grave replies. The two of them spoke in Teluwaceet; and Alan thought it strange to hear a guttural primitive language

flowing so familiarly from Joan's lips. What a gamut of experience this girl had had in her twenty years! All the way from classic Greek to the tongue of wild mountain tribes. From a university seminar to the leather tents of Stone-Age Indians.

She whirled to him, at something that Luke said. "Alan! Did you hear that? There's nobody between us and Teluwaceet Pass! Clancy's the last man! We've got an open road ahead!"

"That's good," Alan said listlessly. This "open road" meant the road to oblivion for him.

"And there's no snow in the pass, Luke says!"

"Fine," Alan commented.

The Indian invited them into his cabin. Wet and exhausted, they trudged inside, glad to be under a roof again.

For days Joan had been talking about this Luke Kaneewaugh, and Alan was curious to see what sort of person he was. Her story of him and of his people was as epic as a page from her own *Anabasis*. In the generations reaching back into the mists of legend, the Teluwaceets, a fierce mountain people, had waged war and counter-war against the marauding Timber Crees to the south, the treacherous Sikannis and Nahannis to the north and east; and they had fought off repeated invasions of the Cosack *promyshleniki* in the days when Russia ruled northwestern America and plundered the hapless natives from the Yukon to the Golden Gate.

Through wars and white-man maladies the Telu-

waceets had slowly dwindled to a band of fifty. Of that last band Luke had been *tyee* or chief. Between him and Boyd Hastings, who had been Indian deputy for the Sulteena district, a close friendship had grown up. As a little girl of ten, Joan had once spent a wild ecstatic summer with the nomad band, playing with Luke's little girls and son.

Then a pestilence, brought to them in dead of winter by a bush-crazed trapper, had hit the band like a mile-long avalanche and all but wiped it out. The few survivors, save Luke, had gone to the Waukootannahs.

Wifeless, childless, almost the last of the Teluwaceet blood, Luke had been living alone for nearly a decade, by the ancestral river of his people.

As the Indian lit a caribou-tallow candle and the light flared up, Alan experienced a shock. He had never seen so ugly a human being. Short and squat of build, with the massive arms and shoulders of a bear, the old *tyee* had a face like a gargoyle, pock-marked, furrowed; and his left cheek was scored from temple to chin with bone-deep weals, where a grizzly once had raked him.

Yet his voice was gentle, his whole manner friendly and lovable.

"Luke," Joan introduced, "this is Alan Laramie."

In the guttering candlelight the Indian looked at Alan long and searchingly. At first his glittering eyes swept the tall powerful youth with question; but then came approval and admiration; and at last,

with a kindly nod, he extended a hand in friendship.

"You are welcome, boy," he said, in slow grave English.

After that handclasp his eyes went to Joan again; and Alan could fairly see him asking her why she was helping one escape who stood charged with a killing, and why she had taken upon herself all this trouble and danger for one who had been a stranger to her a few days ago. Joan tried not to look at the old *tyee*. Afraid of those deep-seeing eyes, she shrank back from him and turned away, till her features were in shadow. But old Luke lifted the candle from the slab table and held it so that the light shone full upon her face; and for long moments he gazed silently at her, as though probing to her secret and understanding it.

As Joan was forced to meet that kindly but penetrating gaze, her face paled in the candleglow. To Alan, watching the strange little scene, it seemed that each of them, close friends over so many years, knew exactly what the other was thinking.

Then Luke put the candle down, and his hand went out to Joan's shoulder.

"Perhaps this is but a night-born fear, little one," he said tenderly, in his grave way of speech. "You do not know. You only suspect, *nika tenas*."

Joan's gaze fell. "I'm afraid, Luke," she quavered. "Oh, I'm afraid — afraid it's true."

The Indian caressed her hair with his gnarled

hand, as though she was a frightened child whom he must comfort. "It is only a fear," he repeated. "A thing of the night. The morning sun will come and drive it away, and then you will laugh again, my little one."

Like a kindly father with a pair of tired children, the Indian made them lie down on his bunk and rest. He brought out a bear-grease ointment for them to rub on their paddle-blistered hands, and gave them each a birchbark cup of some hot aromatic tea that drove the chill from their bodies.

After going down the river bank and hiding their canoe, he came back, kindled a fire, and cooked a good breakfast for them, their first warm meal in six days.

Then he made up a winter outfit for Alan: a pair of bear-paw racquets for the fluffy mountain snows; a bag of caribou jerky and other food; a fine sleeping poke, water-tight and lined with bighorn fleece; a stubby ram-horn bow and a quiver of fifty fluted arrows, for silent hunting when Alan would need to travel silently.

In spite of his tiredness Alan wanted to push on at once. If he had to go through that pass, the sooner the better. In all probability those Waukootannahs had contacted some posse by this time. If he delayed, his streak of good luck might come to an abrupt end.

"What do you think about it, Luke?" he asked.

Joan and he were sitting on the edge of the bunk. The morning sun had broken through the clouds and was slanting in at the cabin door. "There aren't any lookouts on above, and we can travel by daylight. If it's only twenty-four hours to the pass, as you say, we can be there by sun-up tomorrow."

Luke nodded. "It is wise to go. The *Shagalasha*" (Mounted Police) "may be coming up Teluwaceet now. I will make my birchbark ready."

"I'm going as far as the pass with you, Alan," Joan said, as Luke went out of the cabin.

"You can't. How'll you get back?"

"In Luke's canoe. He and you won't be taking it across the watershed — you'll travel afoot from the pass to the Border. I'd like awf'ly to go along."

"No."

"But why not, Alan? It's a short safe trip. After we've come so far together and through so many dangers, why can't I go the rest of the way? I'd know positively then that you had escaped."

"All right," Alan gave in. "I guess you can't get mired into trouble any deeper than you already are."

"You don't seem to want me along. I won't go if you don't want me."

"You know better than that!" Alan burst out, in misery, in helpless anger against his cruel outlawry. "The trouble is, we've come too damned far together now! I wish you hadn't ever left Lac L'Outre or come along at all! I wish I hadn't ever

met you!" And with those astounding words he flung out of the cabin and strode down to help Luke.

Within the hour the three of them shoved off, in Luke's fragile birchbark.

Too tired to help with the paddle work, Joan unrolled the poke, crept into it, and was dead asleep before they had gone half a mile.

As Alan paddled wearily along, glancing down at her now and then, he was sorry for his outburst in the cabin. Joan had chosen to ignore it, but he knew it had made her unhappy; and he swore that in the little time remaining to them he would clamp down on himself, try to be cheerful, and say *Klahowya* as merely a good friend.

He wondered what it was that Luke had searched her eyes for, in the candleglow, and what had made her say, "I'm afraid, Luke; oh, I'm afraid." The motive which had driven her to this dangerous flight and which she had told no one on earth — old Luke had read that secret. And in spite of his comforting words to her, the old *tyee* plainly believed that her fears were all too true.

The sun swung up, the sky faired off. The high upland country into which they had penetrated was vastly different from the mossy and luxuriant valley of the Sulteena. Wild and lonely, it was a cold stark region of granite and icy waters and only the green of high-growing conifers. Stunted and storm-

gnarled, the timber climbed but a little way up the mountainsides. Snowline was less than three thousand feet above the river; and a chill wind blowing down valley brought them the icy breath of half a hundred surrounding glaciers.

From thickets along the stream an occasional family of broad-faced caribou stared unconcernedly at them, tame as barnyard animals. Black and cinnamon bear trundled along the water edge, looking for dead fish. On the stark bare slopes above timberline they saw huge grizzlies digging out lemming or overturning rocks to get at the hoary marmots beneath. More than once they watched a half-ton boulder, dislodged at a heave by a big silvertip, come thudding down the precipitous slope and crash into the timber below.

Far above, among the talus slides and the naked cliffs, bands of bighorns were nibbling at the scant patches of mountain lettuce, and goats were clinging like white specks against the sheer rock walls.

An hour after leaving Luke's cabin, Alan noticed that the Indian seemed uneasy. From the prow of the canoe the old *tyee* kept glancing downstream, watching the flight of water birds, studying the actions of bighorn bands on the high bluffs above the river.

"What's the matter, Luke?" he asked. "Think somebody's creeping up on us?"

"There are signs 'yes' and signs 'no'," the Indian

answered. "I will keep watch. I will know of danger long before it comes."

They paddled on.

The sharp tang of autumn in the air made Alan think, with a stab at heart, of the university campus, the glad "hello" of returning classmates, the joyous hustle and bustle of registration, and the afternoon hours at the practice field. He would smash no line or drive no goal that year, or any year. While his team-mates were carrying on, he would be a fugitive on a lonely trail, an alien in an alien land.

Eight miles above Luke's cabin they came to a long rapids with a twenty-foot overfalls at the head of it. They glided in to the *décharge* and landed. Without waking Joan, they picked the canoe up, Luke at one end and Alan at the other, and eased it onto their shoulders, and trudged up the tote path beside the plunging white waters.

As they skirled out upon the quiet widening above, Alan gazed westward through the blue-hazy miles, saw the distant Teluwaceet watershed, saw the great notch that was his goal.

Well, there it was, the blue gateway through which he would pass to safety. Remembering the smothering cell at Lac L'Outre and his exultation at breaking free, he felt that he ought to be glad now, when he could lift his eyes and see his final deliverance. But instead he was bitter. Over parting from Joan. Over the ruin of his university career and all his shining plans. Innocent of any wrongdoing, he had

had his life wrecked on a trifling accident, a chance encounter with a stranger. That was the worst of it — a man's life being so much a plaything of forces beyond his control.

He tried to believe that his own situation was extraordinary and that he was drawing conclusion hastily; but then he thought of other people whom he knew well, and it seemed to him that those same blind forces, sometimes lucky, sometimes ironic and devastating, were at work in their lives also. Luke Kaneewaugh's life was as good an example as any. Ten years ago a sick trapper had happened to stumble upon Luke's band, in a midwinter storm; and from that accident a whole tribe had perished.

It took all the heart out of him to think that a human being was merely a bit of driftwood on a dark river, bumping into other bits, tossing helplessly this way and that. What good would it do, he asked, to try and build again, yonder in Alaska or elsewhere, if at any time fate might come along and destroy everything? Why work faithfully and live according to good conscience? If he was a bit of driftwood, why not just drift? . . .

A mile above the long portage Luke turned around and said abruptly:

"The signs are 'yes' now. We are in danger. Our enemies are but a little way down Teluwaceet. They are traveling fast. They are coming in several canoes."

Alan was astonished — and somewhat skeptical.

He himself had been watching for danger signals and had seen none whatever. Furthermore, in the last mile Luke had not been looking at the river at all but gazing up at a bald pinnacle rock two thousand feet above timberline.

"You must have eyes of magic, Luke," he said, "if you can look up at a rock cliff and see enemy canoes downstream."

Luke did not argue. He merely pointed toward the south bank of the Teluwaceet and said, "Creek there. We will slip into it and hide."

"But we oughtn't to hide and waste time unless we have to. What makes you believe somebody's camping on our trail? And how d'you know they're close?"

Luke dipped paddle hurriedly and swung the canoe. "There is not time to tell you. They are just around that mountain foot. We must stop."

"All right," Alan agreed. "If you say stop, we'll stop."

They angled over to the creek mouth. Well back among the willows and junipers they hid the canoe and themselves.

As they waited, the old *tyee* motioned at the high pinnacle rock across the Teluwaceet. "Look, boy," he said, as a teacher might have spoken. "The big-horn ram yonder, guarding his flock — do you see him?"

Alan studied the gray rock-mass for several moments before he finally made out the sentinel ram.

"Where is he looking?" the Indian asked.

Alan watched the big sheep for a time. In the clear mountain air he could catch the movements of the animal's head and heavy black horns in spite of the distance.

"Why, uh, he gives us a stare now and then, but mostly he's . . . Why, he's looking *down* the river!"

Luke nodded. "I saw him watching down Teluwaceet. He was but one of the 'yes' signs."

At the mountain foot three thousand yards downstream, eight canoes came dancing into sight and stood up the river toward them—a swift and ominous fulfillment of Luke's warning.

Each of the canoes carried four men. In the lead craft, as the little armada drew near, Alan spotted Eric Norman, a Mounted constable, a tall Cree, and the huge Battu Ducharme. In one of the rear craft the three half-naked Waukootannahs were paddling away vengefully.

Every man of those thirty-two was rifle-armed, and a dozen wore belt-guns also. Besides Norman there were six Mounted Police in the party.

The canoes swept past, so close that Alan could have scooned a stone out to them; and disappeared up the winding stream.

"I guess this ends our daytime travel," Alan said despairingly. Eight canoes, now, between them and the pass. Eight canoes and thirty-two men. "I guess we don't travel any more today, Luke."

"No," Luke agreed. He was more philosophical, but he too was hard hit. "We camp today. Tonight we try to go on."

He guided the way on up the creek to a deep secluded gorge, entirely cut off from view of the river; and in a sheltered drogue of minaret pines they made camp.

Weary and sleepy, Alan spread his blankets beside Joan's poke, on the pine-needle carpet, and lay down to rest, disgusted at the rotten luck which had overtaken them just when that blue V-cleft was in sight and they had a clear road. Now they would have to run another gauntlet of lookouts and ambushes, not on a broad friendly river but on a narrow mountain stream where the portages would make ambushes easy and deadly. They would have to grope along at night again, afraid of every sound and shadow. And if they did manage to reach the pass, they would find it bristling with men and rifles.

He wished now that he had sunk that Waukootannah canoe in the middle of the lake, yesterday morning, and let those three Smokies drown. They were the cause of this evil luck. His mercy toward them might cost Joan a term in prison and cost him his life. After slipping past all those posses, out-running the whole man-hunt and standing on the very threshold of safety, he and Joan had had to encounter those three Waukootannahs. Accident, again; sheer blind accident!

At dark that evening they broke camp, dropped down the creek to the river, and headed on west for the pass.

A sense of impending disaster weighed on Alan, from the first paddle stroke of that tragic night. He would have stopped or turned back, except that he hated to appear afraid. If he could have done so he would have fired Joan and Luke back down the Teluwaceet and gone on alone, facing by himself the dangers that were rightfully his.

A blood-red moon, encircled by the hunter's "eye of the buck", hung above the western ranges. Far away south, so far it was a mere pinpoint of sound in the night silence, a wolf lifted its crescendo wailing to the stars; and from on beyond it came answering wails, incredibly thin and distant, like tiniest half-heard whisperings.

They had no friendly fog that night. At that high altitude the air was as cold as the waters, and the river did not "smoke." Moreover, the moon shone down, though wanly, and turned the water to rippling silver and gleamed betrayingly on their wet paddle blades.

A short mile above the creek mouth they came to a portage.

Approaching cautiously, they drew in to the north bank, a pistol-shot below the landing; and Luke bade the other two stay there while he scouted the portage trail. Like a shadow he stepped away from them, faded into the timber and was gone.

While Joan and Alan waited, a great white owl, tilting on noiseless wing, swooped down at them and clicked its bill viciously and then vanished ghostlike into the dark woods.

Minutes later, Luke reappeared, on feet shod with silence.

"The portage is clear," he announced.

They paddled on to the landing, got out, toted up along the four hundred yards of plunging water; and floated their canoe at the *embarque* above.

As they were gliding out upon the calm stretch there, Alan looked ahead at a dark islet eighty yards away; and in a clump of alders at its tip his eyes picked up a gleam, the bright sinister glint of moonlight on rifle steel.

With a hard stroke he stopped the canoe short, thinking to dart back to the *embarque* and get off that deadly open water.

But he was too late. The gleam he had seen was the gleam of a gun being lifted and aimed. Before he could turn the canoe or even whisper warning to his companions, a jet of rifle fire leaped from the alder clump and a bullet *zzinged* past his throat.

On the island tip a man suddenly shouted, a white man, Constable Clancy — shouting at the men in the ambush with him. "*Stop shooting!* The girl — don't you see *her*? Stop that shooting! Get into your canoes, get out there, nail them!"

But the Crees and *métis* had broken all out of control, at sight of the man they were hunting; and

Clancy's frantic orders were drowned in the snarl and *kr-oo-mm* of their guns. Half a dozen rifles opened on the lone canoe; the alders were suddenly alive with rifle flame; a storm of bullets came screaming across the moonlit water.

The little birchbark shivered from the impact of the slugs. A bullet tore through Alan's jacket sleeve, between his arm and body, missing his heart by inches. Another seared along his leg, burning like a red-hot flash of pain. Another ricocheted from the water, hit his paddle, and the handle broke in his grasp.

He lunged forward, seized Joan's paddle, pushed Joan behind the shelter of his pack. "Get down, down flat!" he ordered. "Stay down!"

In the prow of the canoe Luke jumped to his feet with a hoarse cry and clasped at his breast, swaying drunkenly; but then the Indian shook himself doggedly and knelt again and started paddling.

If it had been daytime the ambush party would have riddled the birchbark and killed all three of its occupants at that first blast. But they were shooting in wild haste; the moon-glint on their rifle barrels hindered their aim; and Alan, bent low to escape those screaming bullets, had swung the canoe around and sent it leaping back downstream — a moving and difficult target.

As he neared the *embarque* the shooting tailed off. Above the shouts of the 'breeds and Crees he heard the smack of two boats being flung upon the

water. Glancing back, he saw the two canoes, with several men in each, shove off from the island and head for them.

"Luke!" he yelled. "They'll catch us on the tote trail if we portage. Let's shoot the rapids! We might make it. *They'll* never try! They'll carry around. That'll give us time to get away, down below."

With a grunt of assent Luke steered the birch-bark into the *saut*. The quickening current tugged at the sides of the canoe, caught the little craft in its grip, sucked it into the roaring waters.

Kneeling in the prow, old Luke watched ahead, as best he could in the dim light, guarding against boulders that would smash the canoe like an egg-shell.

Blindly, almost helplessly except for Luke's quick fend and thrust, they went careening down the tumultuous rapids, spinning and tossing dizzily, through lashing spume, through blankets of icy spray, flung like a chip from one churning whirl to the next, till at last they were hurled through a white wall of spray and foam and tossed out upon the quiet waters below, still skimming along swiftly from the impetus of their wild run.

They glanced back, saw nothing of their enemies; but they knew that the men were whipping across that portage and would be overhauling them in a few minutes more. Only that death gamble in shooting the long rapids had saved them and given them a little time to hide.

"The creek," Luke grunted. "Good hiding there."

As they raced on down river, Alan noticed that Luke's paddle was draggy and that the old Indian's head rocked weakly with the sway of the birch-bark.

"Luke! You're hurt! Lie down. I'll take it."

"No hurt," Luke said. He straightened up and kept on battling, to help Alan outdistance their enemies.

They reached the creek mouth, swung up the little stream, came again to their camp of the previous day.

As they stepped out upon the cold granite rocks, Luke staggered and nearly fell. Alan sprang to the Indian, steadied him with an arm. Suspicious, he touched the Indian's breast where he had seen Luke grab at himself. When he took his hand away and looked at it, by the wan moonlight, he saw with horror that his fingers were red with blood.

Luke tottered to the nearest pine and leaned against it, clutching at its rough bark. His face was contorted with pain, his head sagged, he was breathing in hoarse choking gasps.

"Leave me," he ordered. "Hurry on up creek to better hiding. Maybe those men come up this far. I will crawl back into this brush where they cannot find me."

Only then did Alan realize that Luke was dying, with a bullet over his heart. Stricken with death in the fierce encounter up river, Luke had heroically

brought the canoe through that rapids and helped battle on to this refuge. Now he was bidding them go on while he crept into the dark junipers to die.

Flatly refusing to abandon him, Alan picked him up and carried him deeper into the drogue; and in a little open spot where the moon shone through he placed Luke, as the Indian bade, against the foot of a pine. Crouching down beside the stricken *tyee*, with a feeling of terrible helplessness in the face of death, he wiped a trickle of blood from the Indian's lips and clasped Luke's hand.

Joan, crying heartbrokenly, fetched the blankets from the canoe and started to make a pallet of them; but Luke ordered her to stop.

With a gesture he made her bend down beside Alan, and he spoke to them.

"I go now," he said, and his speech came haltingly, between gasps. "I will no longer be with you, to help. But I can give you counsel. Listen to my words."

His hand tightened upon Alan's, and he said solemnly to the young white man for whom he had given his life:

"You cannot escape. From the *Shagalasha* no one escapes. If you go up river those guns will speak again, and you will become as I now. Only the Keetchee-Maneetou brought you and Joan through those many rifles to my cabin. Only the hand of Keetchee-Maneetou turned death from you tonight. I am old; my people are gone; what matter, this, to

me?" — he touched his breast. "But you are young, you are at the sunrise of life, you must not die. There is one path to take, one way to save you. I will say how."

He looked then at Joan and said to her: "You must leave him, *nika tenas*. You must go to Eric Norman. Tell the *Shagalasha* leader what is in your heart. He is wise. He will know that your words are truth. When he hears what you say, he will call his men from the river and the pass, and send them away. Then your young friend can go safely to the West land. The *Shagalasha* leader will even travel with him, by night, and *help him escape*. Will you go to Norman?"

"Yes, yes," Joan promised brokenly.

"You are brave," Luke said. "Always you were brave, little one." He stroked her hair; and as though memories were trooping back, haunting him, he mumbled, "I remember — the little white *squaw-siche* — playing beside the bright waters with the children of Luke. She was brave of heart, the bravest of them all."

For a moment he said nothing more. His head bent. With an effort he roused himself, and his hands dropped away from Alan's and Joan's.

"Go," he ordered. "I must be alone — now. Go quickly. I have short time left."

They rose up and moved out through the woods a little way, holding each other's hand.

Looking back, they saw Luke sitting against the

tree, with his head uplifted and the moonlight falling upon him in a dark-silvered splash; but as yet he was silent.

"Joan," Alan begged of the sobbing girl, "why did he tell you to go to Norman? What can you say to Norman that'll help us?"

Joan would not answer.

"Are you going to Norman? Joan, tell me — are you?"

"No, no!" she sobbed. "I won't go! I won't tell him!"

"Won't tell him what?"

Again Joan refused to answer.

From the motionless figure against the tree a slow measured chant arose, slow and solemn, in the ancient Teluwaceet. At the sound of that death chant Joan broke down completely and clung to Alan, hiding her face against him; and Alan, all shaken himself, took her into his arms and tried to comfort her.


"Joan, honey, don't. He's not sorry to be going, when his people are all gone and his family's dead. Don't, sweet — don't cry like that."

With misty eyes he saw the Indian extend his arm feebly toward the sky; and the chant, so low at first that one could barely hear it, rose a little higher and came to him clearly.


In those moments he forgot the hopeless plight that he and Joan were in — their plans all smashed, the pass and river blocked, men grimly hunting for

them with rifles, less than a mile away. He had eyes only for the dying Indian yonder, and ears only for the solemn chant of death. The ancient tongue was strange to him, but the uplifted arm and face told him that Luke, as he went down into death, was speaking with the Maneetou of his fathers and asking flight to the happy mountains of the Beyond, where his people had preceded him and where, perhaps, he was once more seeing his children at play beside bright waters.

Unable to bear the scene, Alan closed his eyes. The chant presently died away, ceased. When he looked again, Luke's arm had fallen and his head was sagged upon his breast.



Chapter Five



LATER that night, after Alan had built a cairn of granite rocks against wolf or bear or carcajou, he and Joan talked their plight over, in the midnight blackness of the gorge.

"We've got to get down out of this creek tonight," Alan insisted. "It's just a little blind pocket. If we don't get out, they'll nail us before tomorrow noon."

"But where are we going?" Joan asked.

That question, from *her*, was a flat confession of defeat. On their whole trip she had been the leader, had planned all the moves so far; she knew this Teluwaceet country better than any of those men; but now she was admitting that she knew not what to do or which way to turn.

To head west again for the pass was suicide. To leave the Teluwaceet valley and cross the ranges, already topped with heavy snows, was humanly

impossible. And to remain anywhere along this strip of river where they had been sighted meant capture within a day or two.

"I'll tell you what," Alan finally decided. "We'll drop back down to Teluwaceet far enough to be safe, and hole up, and give this hunt time to get scattered again. If we disappear and Norman hasn't any idea where we are, he'll have to spread out his search. Likely he'll throw most of his men back onto the Sulteena.

"We'll watch and keep track of these posses. When there's just a thin sprinkle of men between us and the watershed, then we'll start working back west. We'll make that pass yet, kiddy."

A little after midnight they slipped down the creek, hit the Teluwaceet, and headed downstream.

The moon had sunk; a heavy pall of clouds had come out of the west, shutting out the starlight; and a cold sleety rain was falling. The rain drenched them to the skin, and the blackness seemed sepulchral to them, still shaken by Luke's death; but the downpour and wind-torn darkness kept them from being sighted by Constable Clancy's canoes, and they got out of immediate danger.

To play entirely safe, they dropped down past the overfalls portage and on past the pine drogue where stood Luke's darkened cabin.

It was a bitter dose to surrender those hard-won miles of the up-trip, but they had no choice.

As the belated dawn was breaking, they crept

ashore on an island and hid themselves in a tangle of brush.

They had come twelve miles from the creek mouth and felt confident they had shaken their enemies off; but they were quickly disillusioned. How Eric Norman learned of their whereabouts; whether a lookout had glimpsed them or they had left signs on some tote trail — it was a mystery to them; but toward noon three canoes and a dozen men appeared on the lake where they were hiding; and Norman's trackers went to work, hunting around the lake shore, combing the islands.

By downright luck they escaped getting caught — by a half-breed's careless search of their islet refuge.

They dared not stay where they were, with a dozen men hunting them on that river-widening. They dared not turn upstream, with a score of men ambushing those portages. They would have to drop on down, give still more ground, surrender still more miles of that up-trip.

At nightfall they crept out of their miserable camp; and in a slashing rain and windy darkness they ruefully worked on down Teluwaceet. Past the last portage, where the big Police launch was tied up. Past the lake where they had disastrously run into those three Waukootannahs.

Their whole plan of making Teluwaceet Pass seemed to be slowly crumbling away. With every paddle stroke they were being driven farther and farther from that mountain gap. Time itself was

against them. Their days of grace were numbered. The first fall of snow in the valley — and that would come with the first shift of wind to the north — would stop them short. Already a thin scum of ice fringed the river shore each morning, and snow-storms were swirling around the mountain peaks above them.

Through those gray-dismal days and heartbreaking nights, Alan remembered Luke's prophetic, "You cannot escape. From the *Shagalasha* no one escapes"; but he damned the *Shagalasha* and Norman, and defied the hunt, and clung stubbornly to his hope of cutting through to that blue gateway. It made him furious to be hounded and shot at. Instead of cowing him, the hunt turned him hard and defiant. At first Joan had been the optimistic and aggressive one. Now it was he who supplied the courage and fight to keep them battling on.

He would have given much to know why old Luke, with his dying breath, had urged Joan to go to Eric Norman. In plain words Luke had stated that she could spike this whole man-hunt by appealing to the Mounted officer. Why, then, did she refuse to go? What was holding her back from that? And what under heaven could she say to make Norman call off that search and actually help the hunted person?

He asked her none of these questions, knowing she would not answer them. Nor did he try, any more, to persuade her to leave him. She would refuse that too. He realized by now that her personal

stake in his escape, whatever that stake might be, was almost as great as his own.

Below the lake where they had met the three Indians, they made camp in a big driftwood lodgment on a mid-river bar. Dank and muddy, the place was the most miserable of all their refuges. They felt like a pair of muskrats as they crawled back into it and looked around. But it was safer than the river shore, and from it they could watch the hunt at close range.

"Here's where we camp and wait for the breaks, honey," Alan said, hanging his battered hat and her bedraggled tam on some drift. "We've got Norman fooled. He thinks we're hitting for the Forks. I'll bet both legs that he's going to throw most of his men down below us. When he does, we're striking west again."

He cleared a little area on the muddy gravel, back under the drift; and propped up a wire-weave blanket to shunt off the rain. Then he spent an hour working their canoe back through the logs to the cleared space, in order to spread Joan's sleeping poke in the dry bottom of the boat.

Just at daybreak a canoe came jogging down Teluwaceet, and the four men in it stopped on the bar to cook breakfast. One of the four was the huge *métis*, Battu Ducharme. Another was the Lac L'Outre Cree, Sheekooteemie. The other two were nondescript whites. They built their fire so close to the drift that Alan and Joan, half-starved, could

smell the tantalizing odor of their trout and tea and sizzling bacon.

From the grunty conversation of the four, as they wolfed the food and gulped the hot tea, Alan gathered that they had quarreled with Corporal Norman, pitched off from the main hunt, and now were engaged on a hunt of their own for Joan and him. A remark that the big 'breed dropped explained the quarrel:

"Lak hell I take y'ong Laramie alive! He didn't take Seth Grindley alive, *hein*? If I get wan good look at heem down a rifle barrel, I'll give heem w'at he give Seth — a bullet 'tween de eyebrows. We had heem cotched wan tam and de Mounters lef' heem 'scape; but de nex' tam we cotch heem —"

The *métis* swiped a finger across his throat; and to that bloodthirsty sentiment the other three growled agreement.

The quartet left in a little while and went on down river, nosing along the shores, searching the land-wash for marks of a canoe keel.

When they were gone Alan sat down on the edge of the canoe, where Joan had crawled into the sleeping poke. "Partner," he asked, "I've been wondering, ever since Lac L'Outre . . . Why are these men, especially these 'breeds and Smokies, so worked up over this Grindley killing? You'd think Grindley was their brother. Remember how they ganged me in your store? And tried to lynch me afterward. And how Clancy couldn't keep his outfit from blaz-

ing away at us up the river? Why're they so downright hot to pump me full of lead bumblebees? They must have some reason."

"I don't blame them so much," Joan said, "except that they're ignorant and inflammable. Seth Grindley was a little tin god to them. You weren't living at Lac L'Outre; it'd be hard to tell you why he had such a hold over them and why they're so vengeful now. I personally think that Seth Grindley was one of the most evil and sordid men I ever knew. If you want my opinion, the stranger you met at the Dunbar did a thoroughly good job when he shot Grindley. I only wish he'd done it sooner."

She went on to explain that Grindley, who had owned a string of small stations in the Three Rivers and had been bought out by a big company, had appeared at Lac L'Outre two years ago, built a second trading store where only one could do well, and had begun a systematic campaign to ruin Boyd Hastings. By paying auction rates for peltry and selling supplies at cutthroat prices — later to be jacked extortionately high when the rival store had been frozen out — he had lured away most of her father's trade and driven him to the edge of bankruptcy.

Not content with that, Grindley had framed her father at a time when the latter lay sick and helpless. Conniving with some Crees, Grindley got them to swear that Hastings had not paid them their "treaty money" but had pocketed it himself. The

frame-up had cost Boyd Hastings his Indian deputyship, and he would have been sent to the pen if Corporal Norman had not put up a stiff fight for him.

As Alan listened to Joan's story of the feud between "Dads" and Seth Grindley, a suspicion shot across his mind, jolting him to his boots. Maybe Joan's daddy, defamed and ruined by the horny-handed trader, had tried to even accounts. Maybe Boyd Hastings was connected with this Grindley killing. Maybe *there* lay the explanation of Joan's fear and of her sense of solemn obligation toward a wrongfully accused person.

But then he took second thought, and his suspicion ebbed. That Dunbar stranger was the real killer. No question about that. And if Boyd Hastings was at all implicated, surely Eric Norman would have known. Norman was a shrewd experienced officer; he had watched that feud for months; had been in daily intimate contact with Joan, and had helped her with her dad. For a sick man, sick of body and mind, to pull a crime like that under Eric Norman's nose — it just didn't look possible. . . .

At sun-up the Police launch, piloted by Constable Knight, came down Teluwaceet, streaked past their refuge, and disappeared on downstream.

Alan guessed that it was making a quick trip to Lac L'Outre, to bring up more men and fresh supplies. And he guessed right. Late that evening he heard its drone again, growing louder and closer as the big craft returned up Teluwaceet.

From their driftwood hiding he and Joan peered at it; and with sinking hearts they watched it go by them in the first hush of twilight. As if all the men and boats already on the upper river were not enough, the launch was bringing nineteen other men, seven more paddle craft, and supplies to last till the two fugitives were caught.

In wordless despair Alan and Joan listened to the drone die away up river. Until then they had clung to the hope of reaching Teluwaceet Pass. But that launch and its cargo was the last straw. Their flight to the west was ended. Norman was *not* going to shift his men below them. He had *not* been fooled. He was too shrewd. He had headed them off, blocked them; and now he was going to sit tight till hunger and cold and desperation drove them to the open.

Fugitive and helpless, they sat silent in their dark refuge, demoralized by this final crash of their plans.

Chapter Six

THAT Police launch, returning from Lac L'Outre, brought grief not only to Alan and Joan but also to Eric Norman.

At the island where Norman and twelve other men were camped, ten miles above the driftwood refuge, Constable Knight splashed ashore from the launch and handed a blue-barred envelope to his Officer Commanding.

"A wireless flash for you, Eric. From Division Headquarters in Edmonton. It was waiting for you at Lac L'Outre, so I fetched it along."

With a premonition that the envelope held fateful news for him, Norman tore it open and read the brief message, by light of the big supper fire.

INSPECTOR BERNARD IS EN ROUTE TO LAC
L'OUTRE STOP WILL TAKE COMPLETE
CHARGE OF LARAMIE HUNT STOP WILL RE-
LIEVE YOU OF DETACHMENT COMMAND
MERRITT

Fairly staggered by the laconic flash, Norman walked away from the fire and his men, wanting to be alone, to think, to pull himself together.

He had expected trouble over young Laramie's escape, but not a devastating blow like this. The hunt and his detachment were taken away from him; and Inspector Raoul Bernard, his worst enemy on the Headquarters staff, had been sent to oust him and make investigation. Jealous and vindictive, Bernard was sure to report gross incompetence in regard to the jail-break and the man-hunt.

"They've got me on the skids at last," Norman said to himself, and his face was haggard. Likely he would be demoted to the ranks. Certainly Bernard's confidential report to Headquarters would spike that sergeantcy and literally dynamite him with the higher-ups of the Force. Even if he did remain a corporal, he would be exiled to some lonely Arctic *vedette*, to stamp furs, doctor Eskimos and make routine patrols.

"I won't stand it," he swore. "If they block my promotion and black-mark me, I'll buy out; I'll quit the Mounted cold."

In a blue fog of misery he trudged down the dark landwash. The Mounted Police was his own chosen field, his particular walk in life; he had given ten long years to the Force, the best years of his manhood; and to sever himself from the Police was like lopping away a part of his very self.

He thought of appealing to Superintendent Mer-

ritt, the Division head at Edmonton, but he knew that such an appeal would not save him now. Merritt personally liked him and always had; but the old officer had evidently yielded at last to pressure from the staff, for that curt flash came from Merritt himself.

If he could only capture Laramie before Inspector Bernard reached Lac L'Outre. But that was a forlorn hope. He had driven Laramie and Joan to hiding somewhere along the lower Teluwaceet; but heaven alone knew exactly where. The hard-fighting collegian, aided by Joan's intimate knowledge of that country, might elude capture for weeks. He had never led a man-hunt so baffling, so exasperating, as his hunt for those two. They slipped through his posses like a pair of specters, and that birchbark canoe of theirs went past his lookouts like a wraith of the river.

On a landwash boulder he sat down, tried to think, wondering how to strike back at his enemies and save himself from this personal annihilation.

An idea, a possible line of action, occurred to him. He threw it out as wishful thinking, a hopeless scheme. But the idea would not down. He began analyzing it, following out its details, figuring its chances of success.

Those chances, he saw, were none too rosy. The scheme was a gamble, at best a fifty-fifty throw. But he could think of nothing better; and if the scheme did work, it would be a smasher. It would

get him out of this jam, clinch that sergeancy and flatten out Raoul Bernard like a steamroller.

At a brisk pace he strode back to the campfire.

"Knight," he crisped out orders, "I want you to take me in to Lac L'Outre. At once. Rig up that searchlight on the launch. Clancy, you're in charge of this hunt. If somebody should locate Laramie and Joan, you lead the closing-in posse yourself, and take only trusted men who'll obey you. I don't want Joan hurt — or Laramie either, for that matter."

In the launch he and Knight left immediately.

Sitting beside the constable, Norman played the searchbeam on the river, so that Knight could pilot; but his mind was busy with the details of his thunderous plan.

From the very beginning he had never thought that Alan Laramie was the really guilty party in this Grindley murder. The glaring evidence against Laramie had made him honestly believe, for a time at first, that the young collegian was indeed implicated. But even that belief had faded now; and for days the conviction had steadily been growing on him that Alan Laramie had had nothing whatever to do with the crime.

One reason for his change of opinion — merely one reason out of several — was his discovery from a whiskery old prospector that Laramie really had spent the summer at hawking gold in the Grizzly Range. This fact was not conclusive evidence one

way or other, for Laramie could easily have committed the crime after coming out of the up-country. But the human significance of that fact did point straight at innocence. Anybody who would put in a summer tomrocking sand in that God-forsaken range was an earnest hard-working soul. Not the type to rob and kill, but a person who made his way honestly in life.

After the jail-break, it had been his duty, as an officer of the law, to recapture the vanished collegian. Furthermore, he was sore at Laramie for escaping and putting him in a bad light with Headquarters just at the crucial point in his long fight for that earned promotion. And the knowledge that Joan was with Laramie, camping, traveling, living with him, made him acutely jealous.

Why she was risking a prison term and her life for a man whom she had known only remotely — this was as much a mystery to him as to Alan; but the fact remained, and his jealousy smoldered, and he had pushed the hunt rigorously.

But now this headquarters flash suddenly changed the whole outlook. Bernard was coming. Bernard would take over the hunt and get the credit for the capture, when that inevitable capture was made.

With a hard smile on his face, Norman envisioned the explosive consequences of his plan — the consequences to himself and to Raoul Bernard. Everybody believed young Laramie guilty, because of that damning evidence. The killing of Seth Grindley had

attracted little "outside" attention at first; but when "the Rambling Boulder" broke into the picture, with his reputation, his arrest, his dramatic flight, the city papers had seized upon the story as a headliner; and now they were running daily accounts about the search, the two young fugitives and their shadowy elusive canoe.

Always a person to like publicity, Bernard would organize a spectacular man-hunt, fling all the resources of the Division into it, and bask in the spotlight glory when Laramie was finally taken.

"Let him bask!" Norman mused vengefully. "I'll make him the laughingstock of the Force. The bigger his hunt, the better. The worse he makes those reports about me, the harder they'll boomerang on him in the end."

He intended to go secretly to work, in the face of all that evidence and everybody's opinion, and nail the real killer, and bring him in lone-handed, while Bernard was strutting and posing. It would be a bombshell. It would demolish Bernard and those other swivel-chair enemies; it would lift himself to a sergeantcy, maybe on to an inspectorship.

At dawn he reached Lac L'Outre, hurried up to his office and plunged into work, without pausing even to change his muddled uniform.

Knowing now that the killer was indeed this Dunbar stranger, he wished that he had paid closer attention to Laramie's description of the man. He

remembered only a few details of that description.

But those details, meager though they were, helped him immensely. One of them alone put him farther along on the case than all the work which he and his detachment had done. The stranger was a white man — young Laramie had stated this emphatically. At one sweep this bit of information eliminated all the fifty *métis* and hundred Indians whom he and his men had futilely tried to check on!

With a dead pipe in his teeth he sat at his desk, relived the scene when he had grilled Alan, and struggled to recall what Alan had said about the killer. He wrote down only those bits which he remembered beyond doubt. "A man about thirty-five years old." A pretty vague clue, that was. "Dark complexioned." That was worse; all these outdoor men were almost as dark as Indians. "Black hair." That was a good detail. "Used a lot of Chinook Jargon." That might help. "Not very tall or heavy-set." Little help from that. "Had a funny-looking lip and a kind of lisp to his talk." That was the best detail yet.

When he had jotted down every scrap of that priceless description, he got out the secret Mounted directory of the people in that territory, and made a list of all the white men in the Sulteena country, up to and including himself.

The list was not long — thirty-nine names in all.

Methodically he began eliminating, narrowing the field. He eliminated the members of his detachment, for he personally knew where every one of them had been on the night of the murder. He eliminated men who plainly were miles wide of Laramie's description. He eliminated others who had been at Lac L'Outre on the evening when young Laramie met the stranger fifty miles up Sulteena. By reference to data which his detachment had gathered, he crossed off still others whose whereabouts had been secretly checked and rechecked.

With infinite caution over every name, he kept on eliminating. Constable Knight brought him a cup of coffee and a tray of breakfast. He swallowed the coffee but pushed the breakfast aside untasted. He realized that he was getting somewhere at last, with a speed and precision beyond anything he had hoped for. His list was swiftly shrinking, narrowing. Already his suspicions were beginning to point and focus. There was a little quiver inside of him, as of a bloodhound which has struck a faint cold-trail after long search for it.

When he could eliminate no further with absolute certainty, only seven names remained.

One of those seven, he knew positively, was the man he wanted.

Constable Knight came into the office again.

"How about knocking off for dinner, Eric?"

Norman looked up, rubbed his tired eyes. "Good heavens, lunch time?"

"After! Nearly one o'clock. Come on back — it's ready."

While they were eating lunch in the barracks kitchen, a Bellanca came winging in from the south, bringing Inspector Bernard. Train or boat had been too slow for the officer, impatient to humiliate his enemy and take over this hunt himself.

Confident and assured, Norman stepped up to his office to receive his superior.

Accompanied by a Headquarters constable as his personal orderly, Bernard strode into Norman's office — also Norman's home — without the civility of knocking.

A smallish high-strung man, undeniably one of the most gifted officers of the Force, Raoul Bernard had always seemed to Norman a kind of martinet, sadly lacking in human overtones. On a dozen occasions the two of them had clashed, invariably with Norman on the side of leniency and Bernard holding out for the law's pound of flesh.

Besides the antagonism thus bred, Bernard, who had fought his way up from the ranks by sheer merit, without help of money or education or personal pull, had been soured by the long struggle, and was implacably jealous of a subordinate who held degrees from an English university and was a well-to-do man by inheritance.

"What the devil are you doing here at Lac L'Outre?" Bernard opened on him. "Why aren't you up north where you belong?"

"I had to come back and attend to official duties which had piled up," Norman replied.

"Those duties won't burden you any longer. I'm O-C here now."

"I have Merritt's wireless to that effect."

"Do you use 'sir' to a commissioned officer?"

Norman bowed. "Sir." He fought back a smile. In his pocket was that list of seven. In his heart was the certainty that before this day ended he would know who had killed Seth Grindley.

"You're suspended," Bernard snapped, "till I can investigate this disgraceful jail-break and this so-called hunt you've been conducting."

"Suspended from what, sir?"

"From everything except my orders! From your corporalcy also — till we see what Headquarters recommends."

At the news that he was a constable now, and in disgrace at that, a smile flickered on Norman's lips. This was Bernard's inning. Later would come *his* inning — and what an inning it would be!

Bernard's glance lighted upon a picture of Joan, which stood on Norman's desk.

"Is that this Hastings girl? Is she the one that's mixed up in this case?"

"Her connection with this case is of slight if any importance."

"Slight? She's with this Laramie, helping him get away, isn't she?"

"We have some vague rumors to that effect, but nothing definite."

Bernard eyed him. "Trying to shield her, are you, Norman? Let's see — I have some information about you and her. Just what's the relationship? You 'go' with that girl, don't you?"

"The relationship between Miss Hastings and myself," Norman said coldly, "is our own personal and private business."

"If it affects this case, it's not! I'll look into that too. Right now, get your things and get out of here. This is *my* office."

In the main barracks room Norman dumped his belongings on a cot beside Clancy's and removed the chevron from his arm.

It felt queer to be a constable, after his years of service, and to be stripped of all authority at Lac L'Outre when he had been Officer Commanding there for so long. He was just a little uneasy. He had only one weapon, his plan, his bombshell. If it should fail to go off —

With his list of seven names and the mass of Police data which he had smuggled out of the office, he set to work again, pondering each name, looking up the secret Police information about each man.

Over one name on that list he paused a long time. After going on and considering the rest of the seven, he came back to it.

Clint Thello.

The man fitted Laramie's description far closer

than did any of the other suspects. Thello did have a peculiar twist to his upper lip and a kind of impediment in his speech. And he did use a deal of Chinook Jargon in his talk, for he was a French-Russian from the Bella Coola district over on the "Drizzle Coast."

The crime, too, fitted Thello pretty closely. A Sulteena River idler, the man trapped a little, washed sand a little, but lived mostly by playing carcajou to the fur paths of other men. It was entirely possible that Thello had graduated from his small-time pilfering to a larger and bolder crime, especially when the stake ran close to ten thousand dollars.

And the heartless cunning with which the Dunbar stranger had robbed a trusting youngster and framed him — that too smelled like Clint Thello. Crafty and bush-wise, Thello had kept up his thievery for several years; and in all that time the Police had never pinned the slightest item of court-sure evidence on him.

Constable Knight came into the barracks room from the office, where Bernard had been questioning him about the hunt and the up-river country. Norman beckoned him over.

"Charles, you looked up Clint Thello on this Grindley case — what did you find out about him, besides what you put down here?"

"That's all I could dig up, Eric, and I did some tall digging on that mother's son."

"You say he was here at the post on the day before the killing. Where did he pitch off to?"

"For his trap line on the Lynette River. At least, that's what he told Battu Ducharme."

"Do you happen to know whether he owns a Mannlicher-Schoenauer or not?"

"I'm pretty sure not. That gun of his that he always carries and does the fancy shooting with is a Savage special. I've handled it myself. But why? What's up?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe just a wild guess of mine."

Knight lit a cigarette. "Say, Eric, Inspector Bernie is sure tying into this Laramie business — tooth and toenail."

"Is he?"

"*Is* he! Say, he just wirelessly the Landing and ordered Sergeant Rouse to send up the whole Landing detachment and their two gas boats. He's going to use the plane on this hunt, and tomorrow morning he's flying up river to take charge personally. But that isn't the worst. He countermanded your orders about taking Joan and Laramie alive, and passed out orders to shoot 'em on sight. That's a hell of a note — giving those 'breeds and Smokies the right to shoot down a girl and a young white fellow."

Norman paled at this news. If Joan and Alan ventured out of hiding now, death would ride with them in their canoe.

"And say, Eric," Knight added, "Bernie has put

Joan on the blotter. 'Criminally aiding and abetting.' That's a coupla years in the pen, and he's got the goods on her."

All this frightened Norman. On his one weapon too dreadfully much depended.

He laid his papers aside, left the Police building and hurried over to the Hastings trading station.

All but certain now that Clint Thello was his man, he needed only a certain little piece of evidence to be positive; and he believed he could get this evidence at the store.

The place was locked up. Boyd Hastings had gone down the Sulteena to the Landing, a woodpile loiterer informed him.

Norman stepped around to the rear door, opened it with a skeleton key, went inside, locked the door again.

In a pigeonhole he found Joan's ledger for the current year. He opened it at page one and started scanning the entries.

All save a few of the postings were in Joan's precise handwriting — mute witness to the long dreary hours which she had put in at the store. The occasional other entries, in the splotchy hand of her father, spoke of a man drink-sodden, shattered, slipping fast into an abysm.

Running his finger rapidly down the pages, Norman came across many records of cartridge sales. He struck an entry, "*1 Bx M-S carts., Gus Stevens, \$4.00. Debt.*" Farther along he struck another sale of

Mannlicher-Schoenauer cartridges to another trap-per. Both of these men had been on his original list of suspects; but his data had completely cleared them, and he did not pause over their names now.

And then, with a jolt, he came to the telltale little item which he had expected to find:

"2 Bx M-S carts., Clint Thello, \$7.50. Paid."

There it was — dead-certain proof that Thello *did* have a Mannlicher-Schoenauer rifle. Craftily the man had kept that gun under cover, using it for his bush-sneak work and displaying the Savage openly.


Thello was the killer. No question, no ghost of a question, about that. Grown bold with successful small crimes, that river idler had robbed Grindley, shot him and fled to the up-country mountains.

The heavy ledger slipped from Norman's hands and fell to the floor. "My God — *Thello!*" he breathed; and his words were not of elation but of sudden anguish. Until that instant he had been so engrossed in discovering the murderer's identity that he had not thought or looked beyond that discovery. Now he did think, did look beyond; and his whole plan fell crashing, like that ledger. Though he knew in his own heart that Thello was guilty, he could not begin to prove it. Proof would consist of capturing the man with the dust and stamped peltry in his possession. And that was tragically hopeless — with Thello.


He had expected that the murderer would turn out to be some person near at hand, easily taken.

But Thello . . . He would rather that the criminal had been any man on the river than Clint Thello. Bush-wise as a weasel, furtive as a slinker wolf, familiar with all the ins and outs of the Sulteena country, the man had faded like a shadow into that appalling mountain wilderness. Days and days ago he had dropped out of sight — after that meeting with young Laramie. To hunt for him now was worse than futile. In his preparations for the crime he had unquestionably supplied himself with ample food and outfit for the winter. Somewhere in those ten thousand square miles of uncharted ranges and dimly known rivers he was lying low, camping tight, entirely too shrewd to venture out or run the slightest risk — eating and sleeping away the days, weeks, months, till the hunt was forgotten or another man was hanged for his crime, and he could go safely on to the Alaska Panhandle with his little fortune of dust and peltry.

Slowly Norman picked up the ledger, replaced it, moved to a window, gazed with unseeing eyes into the rainy grayness. His shoulders slumped. He felt stunned. Hopeless, helpless, he could do nothing now to save himself or Joan or Alan Laramie. His one weapon had shattered in his hand like a sword of glass.



Chapter Seven



ON the same night that Eric Norman returned to Lac L'Outre, Alan and Joan left their driftwood hiding and dropped on down toward Sulteena Forks.

Now that they had given up all hope of Teluwaceet Pass, they intended to try a new plan, a new route of escape. They had little confidence in the scheme, but they were beggars and could not choose.

Luck traveled with them on that first night. Without trouble of any sort, they made the twenty down-current miles to the Forks, portaged over the dim sled trail that they had used on the up-trip, and crossed to the mouth of the Lynette River.

Though their ultimate goal lay to the northwest, up the Sulteena, Alan decided to cut aside, go up the Lynette a little distance, find a good hiding place, and hole up for a few days. Time was precious, their scheme demanded that they act swiftly or not at all;

but in spite of this he felt he must call a halt to their flight, for Joan's sake.

Although she made no complaint, Joan was in bad shape. For four days and nights he and she had been rained on almost constantly; in all that time they had not dared build a fire to dry their clothes or cook food; they had lived on jerky and cold water and an insufferable batter of raw flour and pea-meal; and at times the glacier winds had frozen their clothes stiff on them. On top of all that, they had had ten hours a night of hard paddle work and twenty-four hours a day of nervous tension and alertness.

Completely worn out by the heavy strain, Joan had to have a rest, plan or no plan. She had taken a bad cold, ached all over from grippe; and Alan was scared that she might come down with pneumonia unless they stopped long enough for her to recuperate.

They started up the Lynette. Three miles east of the Forks, Alan turned south into a mountain creek, intending to follow back its steep-walled valley till he found a good camping place and could safely build a big warm fire.

Gray dawn was just breaking as they started up the tributary stream. They were back to lower warmer country now; and the little valley was beautiful and inviting, after the harshness of the upper Teluwaceet. A deep plushy moss covered the

ground, mantled the windfall and boulders, and ran up the pine trunks to the first branches. Along the creek, deer and caribou had worn trails deep into the sphagnum; fool-hens chortled in the buckbrush and drummed on hill-slope logs; trout and grayling flashed in the foam of the turbulent waters; and late berries still hung on the *pil-ollilie* bushes.

As Alan was toting their outfit around a little overfalls half a mile up from the Lynette, he came suddenly upon a crude lean-to of boughs and the ashes of a campfire, where somebody had spent the night.

He put down the outfit, looked around, examined the signs. The wilted branches and sodden ashes told him that the camp was at least a week old. The mattress of balsam twigs under the lean-to was small, an indication that just one person had camped there. He noticed, also, two sets of keel marks where the man had grounded his canoe and later slid it to water again.

"That's no Smoky's fire, partner," he observed, scrutinizing the signs. "It's too big. This fellow wasn't very heavy; he didn't mash those twigs down like a heavy man would. And look — he didn't go on upstream. He put his canoe back to water here at the lower end of this little portage. That means he came up here just to spend the night and then dropped back to the Lynette."

To make sure of that, they examined the upper

end of the portage carefully. But they found no canoe marks. Without question the solitary traveler had gone no farther up the valley.

"Who d'you suppose he was, Joan?" Alan asked, puzzled. "None of these man-hunters would come back this far from the river to camp."

"He was either a stray prospector who panned this creek up to here, or else a trapper scouting out a fur path for the winter."

Alan stared thoughtfully at the lean-to and the sodden ashes.

"Say! D'you suppose that this who-was-he could be the cuss I met at the Dunbar mouth, kiddy? Maybe *he's* heading for the Panhandle, like me! He can't get rid of those stamped furs anywhere in the Dominion, but in Alaska he could."

Joan shook her head emphatically. "The man you met is holed up somewhere, waiting for the hunt to blow over. How do I know? Why, ten days ago he was so scared about getting caught that he gave you a thousand-dollar bale of furs in order to saddle the blame onto you and turn the hunt away from himself. Do you think he'd be traveling or exposing himself now, when all these posses are combing this country? Why should *he* be in a hurry to get across to the Panhandle? He's not being hunted, is he?"

"No, damn all!" Alan swore. "He sure isn't. He sure played cross-tag with me, that two-legged carcajou."

Taking care to leave no tracks at the portages

and no keel marks on the shallow creek bed, they wound on up the mossy valley, penetrating farther than any of their enemies would possibly come.

The day was drizzly, cold; the slight wind had a sharp raw bite to it; but they looked forward to a fire and warm food and their first good sleep in more than a week. A feeling of seclusion, of profound relief, had come over them, back in that fastness; and their oppressive sense of being hunted had dropped away.

Storm-sheltered and moist, the valley was lush, dense and heavily timbered, except where avalanches had plowed their swaths down into the woods. Up the steep slopes, bold cliffs of sandstone and dolomite jutted out, their faces cracked by the frosts of innumerable winters, their ledges rank with fern and bracken. From the hillsides came the whistle of hoary marmots, the shrill plaintive cry of the little pika, the murmur of hidden bridal-veils, the patter of dainty hoofs where frightened deer glanced unseen along the slope.

Five miles up the creek Alan spotted a grayish cliff just a little way up the east hillside. The thick pines kept him from seeing the rock very well, but the cliff looked as though it overhung considerably, and he believed that beneath its foot they might find a dry rain-sheltered place to camp.

Leaving Joan in the canoe, shivering and huddled in a blanket, he started up to investigate.

From the creek edge a well-worn game trail led up

the slope. He followed the trail, for the brush and gnarled laurel were almost impenetrable.

In his hurry to get a fire going and cook a warm meal for Joan, he did not notice that the path was far too broad to have been made by deer or caribou or sheep. Nor did he observe that to the brush and jagged boulders along the trail clung tufts of brownish hair, tipped with silver.

As he came near the cliff he saw that the rock overhung enough to provide fine rain-shelter. And not only that, but back under it there were several dark cavernous openings.

"Joan!" he called excitedly. "Caves!"

Joan, down in the canoe, was feeling too wretched to answer him, and he hurried on to the foot of the cliff.

In the dry rock-dust under the overhang there were tracks of all sorts and sizes — tiniest shrew, chitter squirrel, porcupine, snowshoe rabbit, carcajou, wolf. And a bear track. At sight of that bear track Alan stopped short and blinked his eyes. In all his days he had never seen a bear print like that. He could have put his hat down on it, and the three-inch claw marks would have stuck out from the brim.

"Joan," he called again. "Say, the granddaddy of all the grizzly bears in the Rocky Mountains has been past here! You ought to see."

"Please," her voice came up to him, and Alan fancied he could hear her teeth chattering, "please,

Alan, leave the grizzly bears alone and find us a place to camp."

Alan leaned his rifle against a boulder, got down on hands and knees and crept into the nearest cave. Inside it was dry and roomy; its floor was covered deep with drift leaves; it was a palace in comparison with the wet cold camps that he and Joan had been enduring. But its mouth was so low that a fire of any size would fill it with smoke; and a fire was what Joan principally needed.

He came out of that first cave, examined the one to his right. That one smelled evilly. If he had stopped to investigate, he would have seen a pile of crunched bones in one dim corner and the half-devoured carcass of a bighorn ram in another. But he hurried on, poking into three or four more caves, finding something wrong with each, till he came to the last one.

When he stepped inside, he saw at a glance that it was big, dry, bedded with leaves like the others, and so deep that he could not see to the back of it. From its mouth a small open fault extended up the cliff face, making as good a smoke-draw as one could wish.

As he stood there, a few feet inside, appraising this home where he and Joan would live together for a brief while, he became aware of a low rumbling sound back in the dark depths of the cave. At first the noise was so deep and hollow that he could not make it out; and he thought he was hearing the

rumble of an underground stream, somewhere back there. But then the noise grew louder, throatier, changed to a rasping growl, to a mighty barrel-chested growl that stood Alan's hair on end.

He whirled, leaped outside; and as he leaped he heard behind him the rush and heavy *pad-pad* of a huge silvertip.

Halfway to his rifle he flashed a look back. At that moment the bear was just boiling out of the cave — the most tremendous grizzly that Alan had ever seen or hoped to see.

To his astonishment the bear, instead of pursuing him, wheeled in the opposite direction, as badly frightened as he; and humped away at top speed, down through the laurels.

"Alan," Joan called, "you flushed something up there. It came down the slope through the brush and went up the creek. What was it? Did you see?"

"A ground hog," Alan called back, knowing that Joan would rebel at camping in a bear den, however fine it was.

Taking his rifle, he returned to the cave; twisted a leaf torch and lit it; made sure there were no more bears in the place; picked up some scattered bones and a caribou skull and threw them back in the far dark, where Joan would not see them; burned a little pile of leaves to drive out the faint animalish odor; and then hurried down the path for his girl partner.

Joan could not get warm. Alan wrapped her in

all the blankets they had, but that did no good. He propped her up in such a way that she got both the direct heat from his crackling birch fire and the reflected heat from the cave wall. That did no good.

He made hot tea and forced her to drink several cups. He heated stones and put them against her feet, inside the blankets. He rubbed her hands and arms. Finally he took her out of the blankets and put her into Luke's fine sleeping poke.

But nothing did any good. She could not get warm. Nor could she sleep.

Though she was sitting tight against the hot fire, her teeth chattered and she shivered all over. Her hands felt like icicles, and she was cold to the bone, blue cold, with no body heat of her own at all. Rain-soaked clothes and freezing winds and lack of food had pushed her further down than she had let him know or than he had realized.

Her racking cough scared him. Pneumonia, back in that wilderness country. . . . He had visions of the Police launch streaking for Lac L'Outre with a desperately sick girl aboard.

"Gee, kiddy," he said, veiling his anxiety with a jest, "short of holding you right over the fire on a stick, like a marshmallow, I don't know what to do."

"I'll be all right," Joan insisted. "If I was alone I'd probably drop off to sleep in a little while, and then maybe I'd get warm."

Alan was dubious, but after putting hot rocks all around the sleeping poke and inside of it, he left her.

Lonely and worried, he went down the slope to a *pil-ollilie* thicket and picked a quart of the frost-sweetened berries. Down at the creek he flipped out several trout and grayling, using a suspender clip as a hook and a bit of red from his handkerchief as a lure.

Up the creek a covey of fool-hens were chortling in a berry thicket. Thinking what a delicious roast a pair of them would make for Joan and himself, he found a good throwing club, slipped up to the thicket and knocked over two of the plump birds.

After cleaning them and the fish, he climbed up the bear path and looked in at Joan.

She was still wide awake; her teeth were chattering; she seemed colder than ever.

Thoroughly frightened, Alan resolved on heroic measures. He would build half a dozen big fires in that cave. He would heat the whole place like a sweatbox. Though he suspected that even this would be futile, he could think of nothing else to do. And he had to do something. Joan was going from bad to worse and going fast. He made up his mind that unless he could check her sickness, unless she took a definite turn for the better by evening, he was going to hurry her back to the Forks, put her on that launch and get her in to Lac L'Outre, even though this meant certain capture for him.

As he went out along the slope to a clump of dead birch, he stopped at a tiny streamlet and scooped up a handful of water for a drink; but he threw the

stuff down at the first taste. It was vile with salt and iron, and it was warmish.

In his worry about Joan he did not pause to think about that odd warmness. But when he was returning, with a birch tree on his shoulder, he looked down at the rust-colored bed of the streamlet, wondered where that warmish water was coming from, and why this particular neck of the woods was such a maze of game trails.

With a suspicion of the truth, he laid his tree down and followed the streamlet up slope.

A few yards below the foot of the cliff, he came upon a good-sized pool, twenty feet across, deep, a bit whitish in color, and all worn smooth around its edges by countless generations of hooved creatures which had come there to lick the salt-encrusted rocks. Trails led away in every direction. On the bark of surrounding trees and on the ends of broken twigs, he saw the dun-colored hair of deer, the white-and-black of mountain caribou, the brown fleecy tufts of bighorns, the snowy-white dragglings from mountain goats.

"Old man," he thought, of his huge grizzly acquaintance, "you've sure got things soft — a flock of warm caves to live in, berry thickets all around, and a happy hunting grounds in your back yard, where your meat comes right to your door on its own hoof! No wonder you've got a girth to you!"

He stuck his hand in the water. It was decidedly warm, hot almost. At the upper side of the pool,

where a small springs welled up, the water was actually steaming.

He pushed back his hat, scratched his temple thoughtfully, remembering a time last summer when he had found a warm springs in the Grizzlies and taken a long hot "hog-scalding" in it. That soaking had surely fixed *him* up, surely boiled out his cold and his tired achiness and made him feel like tackling some more sand bars. Maybe this springs would warm Joan up. The water was pretty vile but it was hot.

He hurried back to the cave and gathered up the bewildered Joan, sleeping poke and all.

"W-w-hat's th-th-the m-m-matter?" Joan demanded, her teeth chattering so badly she could hardly talk. "W-w-what're you d-d-doing?"

"Wait and see!" he said, heading for the springs with her. "Roasting you didn't do any good, so I'm going to try boiling you!"

When he put her down at the pool edge, Joan felt of the water.

"It's awf'ly h-h-hot, Alan. And it d-d-doesn't smell n-nice."

"You never mind the smell. That's nothing but a little sulphur. You'll get used to it in just a shake. You climb out of this poke and into that water, and cook yourself. Why, kiddy, people take trips on railroad trains and pay good money for a chance to flop around in hot springs that can't touch this'n!"

"All r-r-right. You g-go away and I'll g-g-get in."

Alan stepped around a rock jut, waited till Joan had got into the pool, and then came back.

In the middle of the springs Joan was sitting chin-deep on some boulder, invisible under the whitish water. She had knotted her hair on top of her head and stuck a thorn through it, in lieu of a hairpin. She looked uncomfortable.

"Pretty great, isn't it?" Allan encouraged.

"Yes, except it's t-too h-hot. I'm coming out in a m-m-m-minute. It's done me worlds of g-good, Alan."

"You're *not* coming out in a m-m-m-minute! You're going to stay in there till you're warm all the way through and sweating like a Turk. It'll boil all that cold and grippe-ness out of you, and then you'll go to sleep; and when you wake up, you'll feel like a skylark. There's nothing like a hot soaking for raw nerves and a bad cold. I'm going to give this place a good fling myself when I get you squared around."

"But I wish it wasn't so awf'ly hot! I'm burning up. You g-go away. I want to get out."

"Stick it a little longer," Alan urged. Though her teeth had almost stopped chattering, her face was still pale and drawn, and he knew she had just begun to thaw. "I'll go get something for you to flick yourself dry with, so's you can climb into the poke as soon as you step out of here."

"All right, but hurry up. I tell you this water is too *hot!*"

Alan returned to the cave, killed a few minutes replenishing the fire, finally picked up a blanket and took it back to the springs.

Joan was looking exceedingly uncomfortable by that time. She had moved away from the center boulder to the lower edge of the pool, trying to get as far from that steaming spring as she could. In his absence she had stood up, with her shoulders and arms out of the water; but she sank back chin-deep when he appeared.

Alan sat down on a mossy rock, deliberately, and contemplated her. "Nice rainy day, isn't it?" he made talk. "I like rainy days. When I was real little — my dad and mother were alive then, and we lived on a farm in the Okanagan — I used to go up to the barn when it rained — There wasn't any work to do outside, you see — I went up to the barn and shot mice with a bee-bee gun. They traveled up and down a rope from the haymow to the mangers, where the horses had left corn and oats; and I'd knock 'em off that rope. Every once in a while a rat 'ud come along, and I'd plunk him too. It was big hunting to me then. A person's first mouse, when he's four years old, is as big and thrilling as that gosh-awful grizzly that I chased out of — I mean as a grizzly bear, later on. Usually I wound up asleep, in the haymow or in old Molly's manger. I still like rainy days — "

"You go on away so that I can get out!" Joan ordered, totally uninterested in those bygone Okana-

gan mice. "I tell you this water is *boiling!* I won't stay in here a minute longer."

Alan did not seem to hear her. Chewing meditatively on a twig, he continued his reminiscences. "After Okanagan we moved north, to the Clearwater. Away north, where there wasn't anybody much between us and the North Pole. I graduated from mice to otter and fisher. Say, that first otter I caught ——"

"You get away from here!"

"I won't do it. You've got to cook a bit more. You're not done yet."

"I'm going to come out, I tell you!"

"You can't," Alan said cold-heartedly. "You haven't got a stitch of clothes on."

"I'll come anyway!"

"Come ahead."

"Alan, please. *Please!*"

Deaf to her pleading, Alan resolutely continued chewing the twig and spinning yarns.

In five minutes more Joan was calling him names, begging for mercy, and trying to push the water away from her with her hands. Her face was flushed; the gooseflesh had all gone; and big drops of perspiration were running down into her eyes.

She was indeed warm at last!

Alan threw away his twig. "All right, kiddy, you can come out now. Flick yourself dry with this blanket and then climb into the poke."

He stepped around the jut again, waited till she

called, then returned and carried her down to the cave, like a papoose in its sleeping bag.

When he peeped in at her, only ten minutes later, she was sound asleep. Her hands and cheeks were glowingly warm; her forehead was dewy; all the taut lines of her face were beginning to smooth out.

Profoundly thankful, Alan bent and touched his lips to her hair, and tiptoed away.

Though he was tired himself, he had many things to do, and he put in busy hours while Joan slept. He lugged a dozen birches and jackpines to the cave mouth for generous big fires. He cleaned his rifle, patched the bullet holes in their canoe, scoured their camping things, and got their outfit in shape for the crucial dash ahead of them.

He washed Joan's clothes and as many of his own as he could temporarily dispense with; built a second fire down along the cliff foot, and hung the clothes to dry, and put the two partridges to roast.

The forenoon was long and lonely, and the hours dragged; but he was happy at having thawed Joan out and checked her sickness. With quiet sleep and good warm food she would bounce back to health again in no time.

After a solitary "mug-up" of tea and fried peacakes, he whetted his jackknife to the best edge it would take, went up to the springs, and with the aid of Joan's tiny vanity mirror he managed a long-

neglected shave. Afterward he tried to bathe in the pool, but he found that it was indeed hot, entirely too hot for comfort. He stayed in only a minute or two, then raced down to the creek for a cold invigorating plunge in an overfalls swirl.

When he tiptoed into the cave toward mid-afternoon and found Joan still asleep, he decided to go hunting. They needed more strengthening meat than trout or partridge; they had eaten caribou jerky till they hated the sight of the stuff; and when they left this mountain valley, they ought to take along plenty of venison or caribou beef, already cooked, for they would dare build no more fires.

Afraid that a rifle shot might wake Joan or that a Cree ear on the far-away Lynette might pick up the faint echoes, he thought of Luke's ram-horn bow, and took the curious primitive-looking weapon out of its case. A short stubby thing, it was less than three feet long but so massive that he had trouble stringing it. Made of two perfectly matched horns, the bow was wrapped from tip to tip with some thin waterproof parchment; and it was fitted with a copper arrow-trough and copper string-notches.

In his boyhood he had used bows quite a deal, on rabbit and ptarmigan, because rifle cartridges cost several cents apiece. In comparison with those long Cree bows, this ram-horn weapon did not look like much to him. Its draw was so short that he did not imagine the thing would shoot hard or at all ac-

curately. However, it might bring down a deer, he believed, at close range.

He left the cave, went up the creek a way, hid himself beside a game trail, and waited.

A few hundred yards up the west hillside some tremendous racket was going on — dirt flying in showers, rocks rolling down, some big animal *ouf-oufing*. "A grizzly, digging out a ground hog," Alan thought, and he believed that the bear must be the huge silvertip which he had encountered that morning. No other grizzly would dare poach in that fellow's territory.

In a short while a frightened buck came flashing down the slope from that direction, leaped gracefully from a twenty-foot bluff to the game trail below, and stopped beside a pine tree, looking back, flicking its ears.

Alan raised the bow, drew the short fluted arrow to its head, and let fly. The whizzing shaft struck true to aim, just behind the deer's shoulder. The buck reared up, lashed out with its forelegs, then sank back on its haunches and toppled dead in the path.

Surprised at the deadly accuracy of the bow, Alan walked up to the deer to retrieve his arrow. He could not see it. Thinking that it might be protruding on the other side, he turned the buck over. No arrow. But he did see a small hole on that other side of the animal; and with astonishment he realized that the polished bolt had passed entirely through the deer, as cleanly as any steel-jacket.

Looking around, he finally found the arrow. Thirty feet beyond the buck it was sticking in a birch tree, still quivering — buried head-deep in the hard wood!

A good weapon this bow, he thought grimly, as he started flensing the deer. A silent weapon for dark portages. Deadlier than any rifle for night work, this gift of gentle old Luke's. He would have plenty need of it, he and Joan, on their last crucial thrust for safety.

They sat outside the cave mouth that evening, watching the half-moon brighten into silver, listening to the night sounds of the wilderness.

Above the opposite range red Antares hung low in the southwestern sky, with the Archer leveling a starry arrow at him. The crisp winelike air was sharp with the tang of spruce and pine. From the creek below them and from a hundred overfalls in the mountain valley came the pulsing murmur of live waters, a murmur that rose and fell with the stir of the gentle night wind.

The cruel man-hunt seemed far away, remote as a thing nonexistent. They seemed alone in the world, isolated from all humanity. It was an hour which, they both felt, would not come again but would pass like the blossom day of a flower, irrecallable. They had reached it through danger and travail and the death of a kindly friend; and when they left it presently, they would be sucked into the maelstrom once more.

Through the nights and days of their flight they had maintained with no great difficulty a frank partnership, necessarily intimate but easy and unconstrained — the working agreement of two people fighting a common enemy and bending almost every thought toward escape. But now, with danger so far off and that isolation beating upon them, they were silent and awkward toward each other. In the space of a few days the fiery ordeal which they had gone through together had forged stronger bonds than months of ordinary acquaintance could have done. Quietly and unnoticed the forging had been going on; and only now, when the stress was suddenly removed, did they become aware of it. Whereas Alan had many times taken Joan into his arms and comforted her in particularly bad hours, and they had huddled together for warmth in their rain-bleak camps, now he was afraid to touch her hand.

Yet Alan knew that this throbbing silence between Joan and himself could not possibly endure, and that though they sat there quiet and motionless they were rushing headlong toward an explosion. Her silent aloofness puzzled him, but it also gave him hope. Why had she turned so aloof, when all along she had been so frank and partnerly? Was she, too, aware that their friendship had become more than friendship?

Awkwardly he broke open a subject which for days he had felt compelled to talk to her about.

"When you go back to Lac L'Outre, Joan, I sup-

pose Norman will put up a scrap to get you free of the law."

"Yes, I suppose," she said; and Alan saw a film of worry come over her face. "Why are you mentioning that?"

Alan dug a finger into the wolf-foot moss. "Because it'll be another debt you'll owe him, and I don't like to see you under obligations to Norman." He added, thoughtfully, "Obligations can crush a person, Joan. Especially a person like you. You're the sort who pays off a debt. You wouldn't renege on a debt if it cost you your immortal soul — and this'n is likely to do just that."

"'My immortal soul' — I don't understand you."

"You do! You know good and well what I'm driving at," Alan said. His words came tumbling, with a rush. "Joan, look here. Listen to me. You've done me a good turn, the best turn that any person ever did me in my life; and I want to do *you* a good turn. It's only advice, but it's honest. Norman loves you. He wants you to marry him. You may give in and do that. These debts that've been piling up and up — you may marry him as your only way to pay 'em off. Joan, don't! You wouldn't be happy. You'd be terribly unhappy. And Norman 'ud be unhappy too, in the long run. You wouldn't really be paying off those debts. You'd just be making a tragic mistake. Norman can't see that. He wants you so bad that he's blind to it. You've got to be firm and strong for him and yourself both."

"I won't give in," Joan said vehemently. "I won't ever." But then she looked away, into the black depths of the valley below, and her confidence seemed to fall from her. "Eric has never breathed a word about my being obligated to him, Alan."

"He doesn't have to, and he knows it. He knows he can leave it to your conscience."

Joan winced. "I — I'd rather not talk about this, Alan."

Alan respected her wish and said nothing more. He did not know Eric Norman very well and did not want to do the man an injustice; but he did strongly feel that Norman was not being completely unselfish toward Joan. Considering the hard lines she was in, with the trading store and her father and all, whatever Norman did for her should be done of a free heart. He ought to go out of his way to keep Joan from feeling so crushingly obligated. His kindnesses were putting her on the spot, and he knew they were, yet he was taking no forthright steps to make her free of conscience.

There was where Eric Norman fell a little short of unselfishness. Maybe Joan had sensed that lack in him. Maybe that was what had kept her from loving him.

It seemed a bit fantastic to Alan that he should be sitting there beside Joan and counseling her impersonally in a matter which lay so very near his own heart. As he gazed at the delicate profile of her forehead, nose and throat, he was shaken with

temptation to sweep her into his arms, in a way not at all partnerly. Her nearness, the fire-shimmer in her hair and their aloneness together seemed more than he could withstand. But he was afraid of her. He had been afraid of her ever since those cool brown eyes had looked at him across the trading-store counter. Though he could domineer over her at times, make her do this and that, comfort her, scold her, yet always that awe remained. It was like a wall to break through. He did not know how to begin. He lacked courage to take the first step.

From the laurel thicket just down slope came a sudden crash of brush and a surly *ouf-ouf*. Alan paid no attention. He knew that his huge grizzly friend, whose home they had usurped, was morosely prowling around down there, afraid of them and the fire.

But the savage growl, so near, so menacing, frightened Joan. She seized Alan's arm, crowded close against him.

"Alan! That was a grizzly, and a *b-i-g* one!"

"Don't be scared, girl. He won't come any nearer. Listen — hear the splash? He's going back across the creek now."

Joan's fright ebbed as they heard the *ouf-ouf* going up the opposite slope. Alan's hand closed over hers. She permitted this. But when his arm went about her shoulder, she tried to draw away. His arm tightened; he drew her close to him, crushed her resistance.

"Joan, honey," he whispered, kissing her cheek,

pressing his lips to hers. "Honey, listen. Please, girl, say you do care — a little bit. I can't go on like this — without knowing what you feel. I never liked any girl before, Joan. I never knew what it was to like a girl till I met —— "

"Alan! Don't!" She fought against him, tried to free herself. "Alan — please —— " She struggled loose, sprang to her feet. "Alan, why did you do that?" she cried. "We were good — good friends; and now — now you've torn it down."

Alan stood up, faced her, not so much ashamed of what he had done as shocked by her violent rebuff.

"You — you don't like me, Joan — at all?" he stammered.

Joan stood silent before him for a moment, wavering. But a lie had to be told, for his sake and hers; and she had the courage and the resoluteness to tell that lie.

"No!"

"Joan!"

It was a cry straight from Alan's heart. His arms fell limply by his side. That single small word of hers seemed to hit him like a rifle bullet.

Joan could not bear the anguish of his look. She touched his arm. "Alan" — she softened the blow of her lie as much as she dared — "I do like you; I like you a lot. But don't you see, Alan, we've known each other only a short time, and you're going away, and — and . . . Don't you see that we've *got* to be

just good friends? Don't you see that it'd hurt dreadfully, hurt us both — our parting — if we were more than just friends to each other?"

A little of his anguish lifted. "D'you mean," he groped, "that maybe — if we had a decent chance — maybe you might — I mean, maybe I might be more than just a friend? D'you — d'you really think I — I could ever be, Joan?"

"I don't know, Alan," she lied again. She had to fight him off, yet she could not bear to hurt him or to leave him without hope.

After a time he said slowly, out of his chaotic emotions, "I'm — I'm sorry, Joan — sorry I busted out like this. I just couldn't help it. But I won't do it again. You can bank on that. You're right — we can't be anything except — except sort of partners. Let's forget this. I understand now exactly how you feel about me. You might maybe like me in time, but you don't now. That's it, isn't it? — you don't now."

With a valiant effort Joan did manage to nod; but then she turned quickly away and broke down, sobbing. And Alan, because he believed all that she had just said and because he was so blind and inexperienced in such matters, did not know love when he saw it, and was totally at a loss to know what his girl partner was crying about.

Chapter Eight

THEIR bear-den home was so fine a place that they lingered on and on there, though they had originally planned to stay just one day and night.

They had leisurely meals and lavishly big fires; in the evening they talked for hours at the cave mouth; they slept through the nights undisturbed and awoke bright and eager to fresh new mornings.

Neither of them referred to Alan's outbreak of that first evening. They shut the incident out of mind as far as they could, and tried to be good comrades. Alan said nothing more to Joan about Norman, nor did he try to probe into her motive for coming on this flight. He did not wish, now, to know that secret. He had become afraid to know. He had a vague suspicion of the truth; the suspicion scared him; and he did not want to have it verified.

So their days were relatively unclouded. It was

good to rove along the creek, roam up and down the beautiful little valley and explore neighboring cliffs and canyons. They watched *Chetwoot*, the black bear, sit in a *pil-ollilie* patch and paw berries into his greedy mouth, fattening himself for his winter sleep. They encountered *Piu-piu*, the skunk, and threw stones at him. They watched *Lemooti*, the sheep, do his dare-devil stunts on the high pinnacle rocks; and listened to *Leh-ah-loo*, the wolf, at night; and in the sunshine of those days Joan's red tam was cocked at the same brave jaunty angle as Alan remembered it in far-away Edmonton.

They excused themselves for their delay by saying that they needed rest, needed to be at their very best for the trip ahead. This was true, but the precious days were slipping. On the fourth morning a skiff of snow came, and it frightened them. Though the snow melted by noon, they broke camp that night and left.

It went hard to leave their calm haven and deliberately step into the maelstrom. When they said good-by to the cave, Alan swore and Joan cried a little.

They dropped down the creek to the Lynette and headed down the Lynette for the Forks. They kept to midstream and traveled with utmost caution, feeling that if they could only keep from getting spotted through tonight and tomorrow night, they would be on the road to the clear. For five days now they had lain low; the hunt was probably scattered; their

enemies must be badly puzzled as to their whereabouts.

Their plan was to strike boldly up the master stream for Sulteena Pass, the only other gateway to the Panhandle. The watershed was a hundred and sixty miles northwest, and likely the pass itself was snow-drifted and heavily guarded; but the plan was all they had, and they believed that with luck they could get through. The Sulteena, broad and usually blanketed with water-smoke, had no portage for a hundred and forty miles; and the mountain gods might favor them with dark rainy nights.

If they did make the pass and found it corked up, they planned to hide there and wait for a snow-storm. At any time now a storm might come howling down from the Yukon. In the blind seething fury of a mountain woolly-whipper, which would blot Alan's tracks shut instantly, he could slip through the notch to the ranges beyond, and then he would be only ninety miles from the Alaska Border.

It was midnight when they reached the Forks. They drew in beneath a water-edge balsam there, looked across at the headland between the Teluwaceet and Sulteena, and saw several "long fires" back in the timber.

"That's odd," Alan observed. "Most of these bloodhounds are camped here at the Forks again, partner. Norman must've found out, somehow, that we got off the Teluwaceet."

Out upon the moonlit water they spotted a patrol-

ling canoe. Then another and another. The Forks seemed to swarm with long sinister shadows, guarding those three river mouths; and yonder at the big fires they saw at least a score of men moving about.

"Alan, this hunt has changed while we were up the Lynette," Joan whispered. "Something's happened."

"That's exactly what I was going to say, kiddy. It's tightened down, it's got worse. I don't like the looks of all those men and boats. Something's up. We've got to find out what."

"How about hiding close here and watching this Forks tomorrow? We can't travel much farther tonight anyhow."

"Say, that's an idea! If we watch those parties going and coming, we'll pick up lots worth knowing."

They went ashore, made their way up the rocky timbered slope, found a good boulder clump, hid their birchbark and made themselves comfortable among the mossy rocks.

Except that they were a little too close to that camp for safety, their hiding place was ideal. When day came they could look down at that strategic Forks, only three hundred yards away, and find out the meaning of this ominous change in the hunt.

"Catch some sleep, partner," Alan bade. He unrolled the poke, made a blanket pillow for Joan. "I'll watch till morning. I've soaked up enough rest to last a week."

Joan crept into the poke, but she could not sleep.

Alan had vaulted up on a rock, was perched on top of it, looking across the river; and his figure loomed against the sky. As Joan gazed up at him she found it hard to believe that "the Rambling Boulder", whom she had watched and idealized from a cold impersonal distance at the university, was actually her fellow-fugitive, sharing canoe, camp and blankets with her while a man-hunt swirled about them.

How blind he was, she thought. And how unassuming! The utmost of his imagining was that she might like him a little bit! When the mere touch of his hand awoke a storm of bewildering emotions in her! When she loved him so much that these weeks of raw hardship and danger of death had been sunlit and happy — because she was with him!

The attitude which she was steadfastly maintaining toward Alan was an odious rôle to her. She hated it, had to guard herself every moment. It was hard to be always rebuffing him. Hard to be so cold and aloof when he was so sweet to her and they were together all the time. Her "no" at the cave mouth had been the hardest-fought word that she had ever spoken. But she had said it deliberately; and she was strengthened by the knowledge that she was doing right. Any open avowal between her and Alan would be an unbearable hurt to them both. Their trails were separating. She was going back to Lac L'Outre, and he was going into the hunted man's Nowhere. This partnerly front between them, however hollow and false, was better than giving way to

emotion and battering themselves against cruel fact. . . .

When morning came and they looked through the water-smoke at the headland, the first object they made out was a broad-winged Bellanca anchored in the shallows yonder. A plane had joined the hunt!

Then the mist lifted more, and they saw the big scarlet-and-gold launch and two smaller Police boats; and a little later they counted twenty-six canoes strung along the landwash. With the coming of full day they saw the camp in the timber, the breakfast fires, the men around them. Thirty-five or forty men in that one place alone. Cree trackers and runners, recruited from various posts down the Sulteena. Bush-wise *métis*. A dozen Mounted Policemen. And a host of other white men — trappers, prospectors, river idlers.

They were staggered at the sight of all this. During their stay up the Lynette creek the man-hunt had grown to proportions that they had never dreamed of.

In their eyes that plane was the worst enemy of all. Swifter than the launches, it could scatter Indian trackers up and down the rivers, keep the various posses in close touch, transport men quickly where they were needed, hover over that wilderness and keep an eagle watch on all the waterways.

Hardly daring to move, they ate a cold breakfast and kept tight to their boulder niche. If a quarrelsome hawk owl or whisky-jack should start fussing

at them, one of those Crees would come across to investigate, and that would be their finish.

As the forenoon wore along, Joan began wondering why she did not see Eric Norman over yonder. In spite of the distance, she recognized several of the Mounted Police and others of the men. But Eric was not there.

Near ten o'clock a Mounted officer, a slender smallish man, came out of the one tent over at the camp, barked some orders at the Policemen who stepped up and wished him good morning, and strode down to the landwash, where the pilot and mechanic of the Bellanca were warming up the plane motor.

As the officer stood in open view on the shore, Joan recognized him. Inspector Raoul Bernard, from Division Headquarters! Several times he had visited the Lac L'Outre detachment, and once Eric had introduced her to him.

With a gasp she suddenly realized why Eric was not there at the Forks, why he had not showed up all day. He was out of the hunt. He'd been supplanted. Inspector Bernard was in charge. Bernard was the explanation of this ugly new temper and these overwhelming odds of men and craft.

The sight of the Mounted inspector stabbed her with self-reproach. The jail-break and failure to recapture Alan had brought trouble upon Eric, as she had feared. His Headquarters enemies had found their long-awaited chance and pounced upon him. He had been relieved of his command. His sergeantcy

had gone glimmering. Maybe he was demoted, disgraced.

And *she* had brought this calamity upon him. *She* had stolen that key and got Alan out of jail. *She* had helped Alan elude the hunt. For all Eric's kindnesses to her and his help with her father, she had doomed his promotion, probably doomed him with the Mounted.

A canoe took Bernard out to the plane, and he clambered in, with the two flyers. The ship taxied down river half a mile, jumped up on the step, circled once for altitude, and lined away south, disappearing around a distant mountain like a great red-winged bird.

"Hopping down to Lac L'Outre, partner," Alan surmised. "All that this army needs is machine guns and bombs, and that ship's probably going after 'em! If you and I are ever glimpsed now, it'll be lights out for us." He happened to glance at Joan. "Why, honey, what's the matter, all at once?"

"Don't you see — what's happened to Eric?" Joan sobbed. "Eric has been — been busted — because I helped you."

"But that isn't your fault, sweet. You had to help me. You didn't let Norman down. He got caught by unlucky circumstances, just as I got caught."

"It *was* my fault. I did let Eric down."

Alan argued, pleaded with her; but he could not alter her conviction or assuage her hurt.

His thoughts flipped back to his talk with her at

the cave mouth. To his fervent prayer that in the months ahead at Lac L'Outre she would not yield and marry Norman. To his fear that something might happen to pile still more debt on top of all the debt she owed now.

He was thunderstruck at this swift fulfillment of his fear.

Evening came. Night shut down. With the sky clear and the moon bright, it was not an auspicious night for traveling; but a fairly heavy mist hung over Sulteena, and they decided that venturing on would be no more dangerous than remaining so perilously close to that big camp.

They toted their outfit down to the water edge, paddled up along the shore line for a mile, then swung out to the middle of the stream.

On the waters around them, night-feeding ducks, gabbling sociably in little flocks, swam out of their path, without flushing. Now and then a big trout, flopping out with a slap like a clumsy paddle stroke, made them jerk around and look. Once they saw a long shadow moving toward them from the east shore, and their blood ran cold for a moment — till they made out that the object was a pair of caribou swimming head-to-tail across the river.

Toward ten o'clock, when they were nine miles northwest of the Forks and happy at getting away from that nest of enemies, Alan heard a hawk owl sound its eerie alarm call three hundred yards down-

stream. To that first call he paid no attention. A little farther along, he heard the call again, still behind them, still at that same distance.

The call seemed genuine to him — he had heard “alarm birds” all that summer in the Grizzly Range. But he thought it odd that the bird should be flying out there over the river, when it was a woods hunter, and odder still that it should be following along as though pacing their canoe.

Suspicious, he stopped, peered back through the ghostly fog, listened closely. But he saw nothing, heard nothing, and finally went on.

Again and again in the next mile the weird call sounded — always downstream, always just beyond the limit of vision. It got on his nerves. The conviction grew on him that the call was coming from the lips of an Indian. He and Joan had been sighted. A canoe was hovering back yonder, dogging them, keeping track of them.

“But why are they shadowing us like this?” Joan whispered. “Why aren’t they closing in?”

“I can’t figure it, honey,” Alan whispered back. “And I can’t figure why they keep on signaling like that.”

He paddled on, with despairing heart. Disaster had hit them again. On their very first night, when they had made barely ten miles toward the Sulteena watershed, they had been discovered. Now their whereabouts again were known or shortly would be. The news would be flashed to that big camp at the

Forks; the whole man-hunt would converge upon them; they would be blockaded along some short stretch of the river; and then those trackers would get busy ferreting them out.

"We've *got* to knock that canoe off somehow," he told Joan. "If I can smack those fellows down before they spread the word — "

Up ahead a second "alarm bird" sounded the weird cry, answering the call downstream. The reason for all this signaling of the past twenty minutes suddenly dawned on Alan. There was a party of enemies up river. The men in the shadowing canoe had been trying to attract attention and help from this other party, before closing in and starting a rifle fight.

Now those enemy canoes had contacted each other and were drawing together, catching him and Joan between two fires.

Through the river fog he glimpsed a low dark mass over to his right. An islet of some sort, it looked. He whirled the canoe and darted over toward it.

The dark mass turned out to be a flat mud bar scantily sprinkled with flags and willows. He drove the birchbark aground, leaped out, started looking for some shelter for Joan before the fight broke open.

Out upon the water, out where he had whirled his canoe and cut aside, he heard a sudden yell and then a blast of rifle fire — the jarring crash of three or four guns opening up at the same instant.

Kr-oo-mm — oo-mm-mm — it sounded as though

the men yonder were emptying their rifles as fast as they could work the bolts.

He and Joan ducked to cover behind their canoe. But not a bullet came their way.

In the midst of that fierce hot *kr-oo-mm-ing* — it lasted but a handful of seconds — they heard a short agonized yelp, then the long-drawn cry of a man mortally wounded, then a *métis* oath that ended in a choking gasp.

As suddenly as it had started, the furor blew over. A silence fell — a silence broken only by the sound of a man groaning pitifully and moaning, over and over:

“Oh-hh — *miséricorde* — *bon Dieu* — oh-hh-hh.”

Alan and Joan rose from behind the canoe and stared at each other in the wan moonlight. Alan was the first to speak.

“Good God, they shot up one another, Joan! They didn’t know we slipped from between them; they glimpsed one another in the fog, thought it was us, and opened full blast. Poor devils! . . . Joan, listen — hear that poor ’breed groaning out there. He’s the only one left.”

They listened, heard but the one man, the stricken *métis*. “Oh-hh *miséricorde* — oh-hh, *bon Dieu* ——”

The pitiful cry tugged at them. Without a word they pushed their birchbark from the mud, climbed in and hurried out to the stricken scene.

They came upon a canoe, drifting. Over the middle thwart lay one of the three Waukootannahs,

dead. In the stern lay a white man, still moving a little but dying, with a bullet through his forehead.

Pausing only long enough to see that they could give no help, they turned upstream to the other boat, where the *métis* was groaning. As they skirled alongside, they saw an Indian, a second of the Waukootannahs, stretched out dead in the prow. The other man, the stricken *métis*, was the huge Battu Ducharme.

Tossing about in anguish, Ducharme was in danger of upsetting the canoe. Bent double, clutching and pawing at himself, he was crazed from the pain of three or four bullets through his body.

Alan caught him by the arm, kept him from tossing so wildly; but the big fellow was too far gone even to know that anybody was about.

"Oh-hh *miséricorde — bon Dieu*" . . . His moans were growing feeble and inarticulate.

Holding on to him and to the canoe, Alan bade Joan: "Paddle us back to that mud bar. I think he's bad hit; I think he's past any help from us; but we can't leave him here on the river like this."

When they reached the bar again, Alan lifted the huge Battu out and laid him on the blanket which Joan hurriedly put down. But their mercy was useless. Shot through and through by that murderous blast from the other canoe, Ducharme was dying. Only his huge vitality, his bearlike clinging to life, had kept him from slumping over instantly, as his

companion and those other two men had done.

Forgetting all enmity, Alan dipped his kerchief in the cold river water, laid it on the man's burning forehead, and loosened his clothes. Joan knelt down and spoke to the man in his native bush-French, trying to make him understand that friends were with him in his last moments.

Gradually his struggles quieted, ceased; and Battu Ducharme lay still.

Across the body of their former enemy Alan said jerkily, "That canoe — I was wondering how to silence it, Joan; but now it's silenced — and that other boat too. Four men killed — four men in less'n that many seconds . . . They must've been driving headlong at us, must've been all keyed up, must've run smack into one another and shot on sight. That shows us — this shooting on sight — what we've got to contend with. When Norman was running the hunt, he gave orders for no shooting. D'you remember Clancy, up Teluwaceet — how he tried to stop those fellows? But this Bernard wants me dead, and he isn't caring if you get killed too."

From some headland three miles downstream a series of rifle shots drifted up to them. The rifle had shot that same series a few minutes ago, when they were fetching Battu Ducharme to the mud spit, but they had not noticed. Now in the silence they did hear.

The string of six shots was spaced peculiarly: ! — ! ! — ! ! — ! — like a signal of some sort.

Listening, they heard another gun, on down the Sulteena, answering the first. It was so far away that they barely could hear the faint reports, but again it was that odd sequence: ! — ! ! — ! ! — !

Alan groaned. "Joan, that *is* a signal. Oh, damn it — damn our luck!" For a little time he had believed that this fearful accident, which had brought death to four men, would allow him and Joan to go undiscovered; but he knew better now. "That man down river heard this bang-whanging a while ago, and he's signaling to somebody on below him. They're passing out the word. They'll pass it clear to the Forks."

They pushed off from the mud bar and hurried on, fighting to put miles between themselves and that place of their evil luck. Now and then they stopped paddling, listened a moment, listened with bated breath for the throaty drone of the big Police launch.

The launch was long in coming, but it came. Two hours after the mud-island tragedy, when they were out upon a broad widening eighteen miles from the Forks, they heard the faint *ratt-tt-tatt-tt-tt* far away south.

They fought on and on, toward the head of the widening, squeezing out the last possible mile. Every mile they could make would add a little to their chances. They would have to go ashore and hide; but if Bernard did not know their exact whereabouts they might stave off capture during the coming day; and if the next night was dark and rainy, they

might break through the cordon and work on north toward that pass.

With his paddle upraised for a stroke, Alan suddenly stopped, on that frantic dash.

"Joan, it just now occurred to me — I didn't only kill Seth Grindley but four other men, those four back the line. *I* killed those fellows."

She turned from the prow. "*You — ?*"

"Don't you understand? The Police'll find that drifting canoe with two dead men in it. They'll find that other canoe and the Waukootannah and Battu Ducharme, there at the bar. Those men are dead, all four of them; and dead men tell no tales. Those four can't rise up and say they shot one another. We left our tracks on that mud flat. *Who's going to get blamed for those four deaths?*" . . .

The swift police launch, traveling five miles to their one, was rapidly overhauling them. As it swung around a mountain foot three miles south and headed up across the widening, they saw a great yellow eye shining dimly through the fog, lighting up drift logs and rock reefs ahead.

And there was a second beacon on the launch. They caught flitting glimpses of it as its beam wove back and forth across the river in an effort to locate them.

They had drawn in near the east shore as they heard the launch approaching; and by quick work they managed to jump out, grab their canoe and outfit, and leap to cover behind a boulder.

As the launch sped by, the shaft of light played

along that east shore, hovered a moment on their sheltering rock, and swept on up the landwash.

When the Police boat was gone, Alan crept back to the water edge, smoothed shut their tracks with a pine branch. . . .

They spent till nearly dawn searching for a good hiding place on that steep eastern slope. They knew they would need good hiding through the coming day.

They finally found a refuge, better than they had hoped for — a little rocky ravine choked with windfall, with the tangled and high-piled windfall of centuries.

They wormed their way back into it, through the dank mossy jungle of logs and rocks; and hastily explored the place, groping along the dark "bear alleys" and poking into the cavernous black pockets. Above them the crisscross timber, piled thirty feet high, shut out the light of day, and a streamlet gurgled down the buried ravine. They felt as though they were wandering in a catacombs of the wilderness.

Near the lower end of the windfall area they found a little dry corner, spacious enough that they could stand erect in it. They dubbed it their "living room", and brought the canoe and outfit there.

When dawn came and they peered out at the Sulteena, they were stunned at what they saw, even though they had expected it.

Canoes — a dozen on that one river-widening — were paddling along the landwash, looking for signs of them. The two smaller Police boats had come up from the Forks and were dropping off trackers on each shore. The Police launch was taking a crowd of men and a flock of paddle craft up river three miles to block a narrows there.

And overhead the broad-winged Bellanca was circling, up and down, back and forth over a fifteen-mile path, keeping an eye on the creeks that led off into the mountains.

Alan's face was gray as he watched. Since his meeting with those three Waukootannahs, the march of events had gone steadily against Joan and him. They had fought off capture, had struggled on and on till now; but now they were stopped. This at last was the end of their flight.

"We might as well make ourselves comfortable, I guess, kiddy," he said, in the cautious whisper which had become habit with them. "It'll be a damned dark and stormy night before we get out of here."

Chapter Nine

AT Lac L'Outre Constable Clancy came into the main barracks room, where Eric Norman was lying on a cot, gloomily staring up at the rafters.

An hour ago Clancy and Inspector Bernard had flown down from the Forks country for a short visit at the post. In the office Bernard was giving lengthy interviews to three newsmen who had come from Edmonton to cover the Laramie hunt.

"What're you brooding about, Eric?" Clancy asked sympathetically, sitting down near him. "Why don't you stir out of here and go hunting or fishing?"

"Bernard confined me to barracks."

"The devil he did! What for?"

"Insubordination. I refused to polish his boots and police up his room."

Clancy tapped on the floor. "Riding you hard, isn't he? If I had your money, Eric, I'd stand the

raw deal you're getting for about three seconds flat. I'd buy out of the Mounted, *hyack*; then I'd muss up Inspector Bernie's good looks, if any, and spit tobacco juice in his ear."

Buying out of the Mounted — that was the very question which Norman had been brooding about. For days he had hung on and on, futilely hoping that old Superintendent Merritt would intervene. Bernard was riding him without mercy; old Merritt had kept a stony silence; and Clint Thello was safely holed up somewhere, leaving him weaponless, hopeless.

Yet in spite of this, in spite of knowing that his Mounted career was wrecked, he had stayed on. To surrender the ambitions of ten long years went desperately hard. He could not quite take the step.

"I expect you've heard," Clancy said, "that Joan and young Laramie are cornered, up above the Forks."

Norman nodded, with a helpless anguish inside of him at the thought of Joan's danger. Stripped of all authority and virtually a prisoner in barracks, he could do nothing to save her from the guns of those vengeful bush-lopers.

Clancy was uneasy about something. After a few moments he leaned forward and asked confidentially, "Say, Eric, have you got any idea what made Boyd Hastings straighten up so sudden? He's as sober as a judge. Has been for days. And where'd he get all

this new stock for his store? I thought you might know."

"What new stock?"

"Why, he got back from the Landing just this noon with a whole York-load of trade supplies. How'd he get 'em, when he's head-over-heels in debt? There isn't a wholesaler from here to Edmonton who'd advance him a plugged nickel's worth of credit."

Norman was instantly suspicious, but he kept a poker face. Twice in the last few months he had smoothed out small money-matter "irregularities" on the part of Boyd Hastings. Now he suspected forgery or some offense of grave nature.

To lull Clancy's suspicion he said, "Boyd probably used some funds that I put at Joan's disposal, Frank. But I'll make sure. Thanks for telling me about this."

He stepped up to the office, went in, saluted Bernard and requested, "If you don't mind, sir, I'd like to have freedom from barracks for an hour or two to get a breath of fresh air."

He had chosen a strategic time for his request. With the newsmen present, Bernard was magnanimity itself.

"Why, certainly, Norman. Go right ahead."

Norman smiled faintly at him, withdrew, hurried over to the Hastings store. . . .

He stood on the threshold, regarding the restocked shelves, the litter of goods on floor and counter,

the three *métis* busily unpacking crates and bales. In his swift estimate those supplies had cost at least twenty-five hundred dollars. And for them Boyd Hastings had paid cash. Nobody would deal with him except for hard cash.

Where had he got the money? Five dollars had been a big item to Joan. Here her father had suddenly produced twenty-five hundred dollars, like a rabbit out of a hat.

A first faint glimmer of the truth, the whole truth about this Grindley affair, struck him and frightened him. He no longer suspected Joan's father of forgery or embezzlement. He suspected worse.

Saying nothing to Hastings, who was hard at work and did not notice him, he strode out, hastened down past the Anglican mission to the wireless station, and flashed a long private message to Sergeant Rouse at the Landing. Rouse was his personal friend and could be depended upon.

Then he returned to barracks.

Late that evening Clancy brought him Sergeant Rouse's reply. Norman read the message once, tore the paper to bits, flung the pieces into the fireplace, made sure that they burned to ashes. Then he put on his slicker and walked out of the Police building.

At the Hastings home he found Joan's father in the bleak little living room, poring over his trade accounts, with a cup of black coffee at his elbow.

Though Hastings was completely sober, the ravages of his long slump were visible in his shaky hands, his bloodshot eyes, his furrowed and pallid face.

As Norman regarded him, in the light of the kerosene lamp, he felt compassion. Toward a stranger in similar condition he would have felt scorn; but he knew the man that Boyd Hastings once had been — gentle of heart, incorruptible, the best of fathers to Joan, of husbands to Esther Hastings, of friends to the down-and-out. For more than a generation Boyd Hastings had been a force for great good among the Indians and *métis* of Sulteena Territory. But then had come a series of shattering blows, one after another. His long sickness of two years ago, when he stepped between two quarreling 'breeds and got knifed half a dozen times — that had started his troubles. Then Seth Grindley had come, with his pirate competition, and ruined Boyd's trade. Then Esther Hastings had died, and the family had been broken. Then Grindley had framed him on that treaty-money matter and disgraced him and got him kicked out of his Indian deputyship.

For all that Hastings had done there was forgiveness, if one but knew the story of the two past years.

Though Hastings was tired from his trip and his toil at the store, he was working hard, almost grimly, over the accounts he owed to wholesalers

and the dozens of accounts that trappers and prospectors of Sulteena owed him.

To Norman he seemed profoundly changed, inwardly, from the sorry wreck that he had been only a few days ago.

Norman drew up a chair, sat down, looked at him across the table.

"Boyd," he said, "*let's talk.*"

Hastings straightened up with a jerk, and his eyes narrowed. Wary and on guard, he tried to read the poker face of the younger man and see whether Norman actually *knew*.

"Talk — what about?" he fenced.

"To begin with," Norman said, "I want to make two points clear. First, I'm not here as a Mounted Policeman but as your friend, yours and Joan's. Second, I don't personally blame you much for this. Grindley did you shameful dirt. He ruined you, framed you; and there is excuse for your retaliation."

Boyd Hastings shrank back in his chair, realizing that Norman did know and that denial was useless.

"Three weeks ago," Norman went on quietly, "you and a confederate pried your way into Grindley's store during that thunderstorm. You selected about seven thousand dollars' worth of light valuable peltry, such as otter and marten. You also cracked that little safe of Grindley's and secured something like three thousand dollars in dust. The dust, being unstamped and unidentifiable, you kept

as your share. Your confederate took the peltry as his share, intending to get across to the Panhandle where he could sell it. Your confederate fled up Sulteena with the furs. You used the gold, or most of it, to restock your store. You gave the dust in at the Landing. Am I right, so far?"

Boyd Hastings did not nod or speak but merely stared fixedly at the man who was so unerringly reconstructing what he had done.

"I am positive," Norman continued, "that you yourself had not the slightest notion of killing Grindley. Probably your confederate did not, either, for the reason that a killing would be dangerous. But something happened to upset your original plans. My guess is that Grindley was awakened by the noise when you cracked that safe, and came downstairs to investigate. Perhaps he recognized you two by a lightning flash. Thello hauled off and shot him. Thello is the sort who'd kill before allowing himself to be caught ——"

"Clint Thello had nothing to do with this," Hastings broke in. "You're right about my part, but you're wrong about him."

"No use, Boyd," Norman said evenly, not without admiration for the man's attempt to shield his accomplice. Boyd Hastings was no squealer. "I've got the goods on Thello. I found him out before I did you. I can understand why you took up with a low-life like him—you knew that Clint Thello wouldn't bungle his get-away. But I can't under-

stand, Boyd, why you ever stooped to a robbery. I never imagined ——”

“Stoop hell!” Hastings burst out. He slammed his chair back, stood up, banged his fist on the table. “That robbery was the only decent thing I’ve done in two years! Instead of sinking on down and down, I took things into my own hands for once. I didn’t give a whisky-damn about going down and out myself, but I was dragging Joan under with me. She couldn’t go back to school; she was wearing out her life here, pinching pennies at that store, trying to hold me up, trying to fight off getting engaged to *you* ——”

“Stop shouting, for heaven’s sake!” Norman ordered. A color surged into his cheeks at Hastings’ last word. “D’you want all Lac L’Ostre to hear what we’re saying?”

“I wasn’t blind,” Hastings stormed on, “to what Joan was up against. Everything that I did and you did; everything that Grindley did against me; everything that happened around here — Joan was bearing the brunt of all that. I couldn’t let my kiddy get dragged under. There was one way to get her out of this mess, and b’God I took it!

“You call it ‘a robbery.’ The devil it was! The twenty-nine hundred dollars that I got from Seth Grindley — that wasn’t a fraction of what he stole from me. Besides that frame-up and all his other dirt, he accepted peltry from men who owed me thousands of dollars. That peltry belonged to me,

and Grindley knew it. I outfitted those fellows in the fall and he got their furs in the spring. *He* got the furs and *I* got the bad debts! Look at 'em!" — he rapped the trade accounts in front of him. "Fourteen thousand dollars! That's what those scrums owe me. That's what Grindley robbed me of!"

"Yes, he robbed you," Norman agreed. "And he deserved a bullet. We won't argue that. But regardless of what he did to you, Boyd, you had no business going outside the law. No crime ever rights a wrong or puts an end to trouble. It only piles up more trouble. If you don't believe that, look at the results of what you did. Look at the fix you've put us all in — Joan and young Laramie and yourself and me."

That made an impression on Boyd Hastings. He sat down heavily on his chair. "I can see it all right now," he muttered. "I've been thinking about it enough, God knows, these last coupla weeks."

"You should have thought about it beforehand. Joan may be brought back down to Sulteena dead. If young Laramie is caught, he'll be sent to the gallows or to the pen for life. I'm busted; my standing in the Mounted is shot to the devil. And you . . . If the truth about this affair ever comes to light, you'll be hanged, man. You were present at that killing. Thello pulled the trigger, but that fact wouldn't make an iota of difference with the law.

"Over there at barracks, during the last few days, I was thinking and planning to get a suspen-

sion leave and go after Thello by myself and nail him, if it took me till next year. I wanted to vindicate myself. But now I don't dare touch Thello. He'd give you away. *He* wouldn't try to shield *you*. Thello could walk right in here to Lac L'Outre and I wouldn't dare lay a hand on him or breathe a word. For what you and Thello did, I'm paying, Joan's paying, and young Laramie may get a rope around his neck ——"

"Laramie will not! I've done some thinking too. That boy is not going to be strung up for something that I had a hand in. Thello's the guilty devil. He's not fit to be alive — stealing that boy's dust and framing him. I tell you, Laramie *won't* pay!"

"You can't help it, now."

"I'll show you if I can't! If Laramie's taken, I'm going to walk over to the Police building and spill this whole business."

For a moment Norman thought that Hastings was merely throwing out wild words that sounded fine.

"You wouldn't dare, Boyd. You'd be putting the rope around your own neck."

"Well, what of it? That wouldn't be such a misery, after what I've been through. There's been plenty times in the last coupla years when I wanted to hang myself, and what's the difference if somebody else does the job?"

Norman was frightened. Boyd Hastings did mean

his words. Meant them to the hilt. If Alan Laramie was caught, Hastings would give himself up.

As he studied Joan's father across the table, he realized that the shock of the unexpected killing, of Joan's flight, of the murder guilt being shifted to an innocent man, had jolted Hastings to his depths. It was this shock which had awakened him. Through the instrumentality of conscience he was Boyd Hastings again. All other influences, even Joan's strong sway, had fallen impotent, but the man's conscience had jerked him back.

"What did you come over here for?" Hastings demanded.

"To cover this whole affair up, if I can," Norman said. "There's a chance I can. Now listen to me:

"People here at Lac L'Outre are wondering where you got the money to restock your store. We've got to kill their suspicions. You can say that I put funds at Joan's disposal some months ago. Say that she refused to use them, and that you took them because you felt certain you could repay the loan, with prices picking up and Grindley's competition removed.

"Another thing. On your part you'll have to give back the twenty-nine hundred dollars that you took from Grindley. I won't countenance your keeping a cent of the money which you secured unlawfully. I'll lend or give you that twenty-nine hundred myself, and we'll arrange some anonymous means of paying the amount to Grindley's estate.

"As for Thello, we don't need to worry about him. He'll winter safe, he'll get across to the Panhandle next spring; and he'll never blab."

"But what if they take young Laramie?"

"That's our stumbling block, our big 'if,'" Norman said. "Laramie must not be taken. He's not going to be if I can help it. If I can get him out of the Dominion, this mess can be straightened out. But not otherwise."

"But that'll make an outlaw of the boy."

"That's something else you should have thought of beforehand," Norman said sternly. "Now it's the only course left to us. We can clear Laramie only by getting you hanged and loading shame and heartbreak on Joan. How does that strike you?"

He paused, watched the clashing emotions on Boyd Hastings' face, and then added:

"Being an outlaw won't go so hard with Laramie as it sounds. I think I can help him get away. I have an idea in mind. At any rate, I can make the try. I'll have to work fast; they've got him and Joan hemmed in, and I may be too late now."

He stood up to go. "There's just one string attached to this help I'm giving you, Boyd. You've straightened up in the last few days. You've got to keep that way. You owe me a lot; you owe Joan still more. You can repay it by going straight. If all this trouble isn't enough to bring you out of your slump, you can sink and be damned!"

As he walked back through the rain to the Police

building, he realized that in this sorry affair one person, entirely innocent, was going to stand all the punishment for the crime. Alan Laramie. Thello was getting off scot-free, with the furs, even with Laramie's hard-won little poke of dust. Boyd Hastings, if luck broke right, would go unsuspected. Joan's trouble with the law could probably be batted around in court till the authorities dropped the charges against her. But Alan Laramie would be a nameless outlaw all the rest of his days.

The gross injustice of the plan, however, gave Norman little pause. For one thing, he saw no other way out of this trouble. For another, the plan held certain advantages for himself personally. It would pry Joan loose from Laramie and bring her back to Lac L'Outre. Out of the wreckage of his hopes he could salvage at least his marriage to her.

At the Police building he knocked at the office door. Bernard bade him come in. Norman entered.

"Well, what d'you want?" the inspector snapped. The three newsmen were not present, and he made no effort to hide his enmity. He noticed the rain on Norman's slicker. "You've been out of barracks! Contrary to my orders ——"

"Oh, shut up," Norman said.

Bernard's eyes popped open. His face colored violently.

"'Shut up' — *me?*" he gasped. "You're saying that to *me?*"

"Yes, to you. And if you were anywhere near my

size, you half-pint, I'd not only shut you up but give you the thrashing of your life."

With fright in his eyes Bernard backed up, put the desk between himself and the tall hard subordinate. Norman smiled scornfully at his cowardice.

"I asked you this evening, Bernard," he went on, "for a leave of absence. I've been on duty for six years solid. I've got months of uncashed furloughs due me. But you refused. You wouldn't give me a single day. You wanted me right here where you could ride me. Well, you're missing your guess. Since you won't give me a leave, I'll take one anyway — and a damned long one! I'm buying out. Here and now."

"You — buying out — out of the Mounted?" Bernard stammered.

"That's what I said. Buying out. Out for good. What's the use of hanging on? You've dynamited me. I know it. I've seen it coming. I'd be an inspector now if you and those others hadn't kept knifing me in the back, down there in your swivel chairs at Headquarters. Get my papers ready." . . .

That same night, in a swift motor-canoe of his own, Norman left Lac L'Outre, no longer a Mounted Policeman, and headed up Sulteena, on a lone-handed and secret mission.

Chapter Ten

FROM the windfall labyrinth where he and Joan were hiding, Alan started out one afternoon on a little scouting expedition, despite Joan's tearful protest that he might be captured or shot.

He left the windfall, crept up the ravine three hundred yards, turned out along the mountain slope and headed for a river narrows three miles north.

Knowing that Bernard's trackers were hunting all up and down that east slope, he slipped along from thicket to thicket as cautiously as he knew how, realizing that he was no match for those Crees and *métis* at bush work.

For five days and nights he and Joan had lain in their dark refuge. Cold and hunger were pinching them; their morale was cracking; they were beginning to believe old Luke's warning, "From the *Shagalasha* no one escapes."

The fleeting days had driven Alan frantic; and he had made up his mind to break through Bernard's cordon or get shot trying. He stood a fighting chance to break through, but if he clung to that windfall a snow would come along, and then he would stand no chance at all.

He believed that if he took a good look, by daylight, at that narrows up the river, he might figure out some way of getting past it.

The afternoon was bright and sunny, but the lazy mellow weather of Indian Summer was drawing swiftly to an end. The air had a sharp October bite to it; and its whine in the treetops presaged the savage woolly-whippers shortly to come. Two nights ago the ducks, geese and brant, which had been gathering together for a fortnight, had suddenly all risen up, as though they had heard a warning whisper of the wilderness; and with a great honking and quacking they had left for the warm southland, in high-flying V's and flocks.

Marmots and conies had gone into their holes for their seven-month sleep; most of the bears had denned, though a few surly old males still roamed the autumnal woods; and the songbirds had vanished from the trees. On the mountain ranges the snow had crept down and down from the summer-time *névés* till now it lay white under the storm-gnarled pines at timberline.

Over across the river from Alan the western slope was bare and black for a stretch of nine

miles — a desolate *brûlé*, where a fierce lightning-fire that summer had swept down valley, burning from water edge up to the belt of high-climbing banksian. Trees, brush, windfall and even the woods soil had been destroyed. But in spite of the bareness of the slope, eleven or twelve of Bernard's men were making a systematic search of it, following up the rock couloirs and poking into the boulder piles.

When Alan was halfway to his goal a pair of whisky-jacks began quarreling at something or somebody, a pistol shot back the slope. Their chatter made him uneasy, made him think that an enemy might be following him.

He slipped into a thicket of devil's-club, hid himself and waited, ambushing his back trail.

He had taken great care to leave no tracks; had stayed religiously away from the sheets of sphagnum moss, where a footprint would show to a sharp eye, and from the drogues of hardwoods, where the new-fallen leaves lay thick. But he knew that those Timber Crees, especially the older men among them, could almost track a rabbit across bare rock; and he was afraid that one of them had struck his trail and was running it.

With old Luke's bow at ready, he lay quiet in the devil's-club, watching and listening.

Down on the river only a few canoes were abroad, for most of their patrolling was done at night. As Alan glanced occasionally at the stream, his atten-

tion was drawn to a certain one of those craft, a light swift motor-canoe. At the start of his scouting trip he had seen this same boat go up Sulteena, with its engine cut off and its solitary occupant paddling along slowly. Now it was coming back again. Keeping as close to shore as the shallows permitted, the man was drifting along at a snail's pace and whistling a snatch from some tune—the same snatch over and over.

Mildly puzzled, Alan wondered who this lone canoeist could be and what the man was doing. Why was he by himself, when all the other canoes carried two men? Why was he keeping so close to the bank? And that odd bit of tune—why did he repeat it every hundred yards or so?

The figure looked somewhat familiar to him, but at that distance he could not recognize the man; and in a few minutes the strange craft disappeared around a bend.

Back along the slope the whisky-jacks finally stopped quarreling and flew off. After waiting a quarter hour, Alan left the devil's-club, crossed a ravine and went on. Though he was still somewhat uneasy, he reasoned that if anybody had struck his trail the man would surely have showed up by that time.

A mile farther along he came to a high timbered "hogback" where he could look down over the tree-tops at the narrows and at a long strip of river on northwest.

As he had expected, this narrows was plugged up so tightly that a muskrat could not have got through it unseen. Nine canoes were upturned on the landwash; he estimated that twenty men were camped there; and the two smaller Police boats were anchored at the lower end, where they could sweep the stream with their searchlights after dark.

The river on above — it was straight and he could see for twelve miles — was almost deserted. In that whole reach he saw only one wispy thread of camp smoke and no canoes at all. Except for stray watchers, Bernard had left the upper Sulteena practically unguarded.

He stared at that empty stretch of river with hungry eyes. If he and Joan were only up there! If they could only get past that narrows!

To slip through by water was out of the question. And to portage around by way of this east slope was next to impossible. Through the dense brush and timber he and Joan could hardly do two miles a night, toting their canoe and outfit; and at that they would be sure to leave tracks.

But that *brûlé* slope over across the river was bare and unimpeded. With good luck, he and Joan could make the whole tote over yonder in a single night and be well on their way up Sulteena by morning.

Getting across the river to the west shore — that was the rub. The Sulteena, nearly a mile wide down

where they would have to cross, was alive with patrol craft.

"We might make it on a good dark night," he thought. "Anyway, it's our best bet, our only bet. If we win, we'll leave Bernard holding an empty bag. While he's hunting for us along this strip, we'll be miles away, laying down tracks for Sulteena Pass."

Studying the *brûlé* mountainside long and carefully, he charted the best tote route, counted the ravines and hogbacks, and fixed the whole slope in mind so that he and Joan could travel it in groping darkness.

Far westward he could see the snowy giants of the Grizzly Range, where he had hawked gold last summer. As he gazed at them, all his ambitious plans to grub a fortune out of that range came trooping back to him, and he writhed at the thought of them. Shining plans they had been, not only for himself but for other people. Dead plans they were now, dead as the dead world of Alan Laramie.

He knew that the Jurassic sands of those little-known mountains offered a golden opportunity to anybody with the patience to wash bars instead of seeking a lifetime fortune at one strike. In that range there was "color" everywhere, sometimes skimpy but often in paying concentration.

Knowing something about dredge mining, he had made rough sketches of a small gold-washing machine, wood-burning, and shallow enough of draft

that it could be towed up those narrow waterways to location. Though he had not worked out the details, he knew positively that he could build a machine like that, of the "roll-and-spill" type. And he knew that through an open season he could clear fifteen thousand dollars with it, for he had made seven hundred dollars in a few months that summer with only a tom-rocker and shovel.

After a season or two with that machine he would have enough capital in hand to launch a still more ambitious project — the one that he really had his heart set on. Along the creeks and rivers of the Grizzly Range there was elbow-room for several hundred people. In Edmonton and Calgary he could gather up a little hobo army of homeless and jobless men, bring them north to the Grizzlies and put them to tom-rocking. From May till October they could make enough to last them through the winter; the hard outdoor life would build back shattered health; the healing solitude of the mountains would go fine with them after the jar and clash of the cities.

"Yeah," he snarled now, looking at the snowy Grizzlies, "it was a pretty dream. But instead of leading a hobo army I'll be a hobo myself. Instead of building that machine and washing gold with it, I'll be swinging a pick and shovel on somebody's railroad."

On his return trip the queer uneasiness which had laid hold of him when he heard those whisky-jacks,

grew stronger and sharper. Twice within the first mile he stopped, ambushed his back trail and waited for an enemy to show up.

Nobody came.

He laid his uneasiness to imagination and tried to shake it off, but he could not get rid of it. Something warned him that he *was* being followed by an unseen enemy; that one of those Indians was either working close for a point-blank shot or else was trailing him back "home" in order to bag him and Joan both.

The conviction grew so strong that he finally halted a third time, swearing to settle the question then and there.

At the bottom of a forty-foot cliff he slipped into a laurel thicket, crept in between two boulders, cautiously bent the twisty laurel branches all around and over him so that he was thoroughly screened, and then lay motionless, with his bow at alert and two extra arrows on his hat brim.

As he lay there, he tried to analyze this strange feeling which had come over him so strongly. He had no belief in a "sixth sense" or in any mysterious intuition, yet he had never been more certain of anything than that some enemy was closing in on him now. Where did it come from, this warning of danger? Not out of thin air. It had to have some solid and sensible explanation.

Thinking hard, he recalled that in the last hour a score of suspicious little incidents had happened,

none of them big enough of itself to draw his attention. The twittering of a pine siskin back along his trail. The sound of a pebble, incautiously dislodged, rolling down into a bed of leaves. A frightened doe and fawn running up a ravine toward him. A moose-bird lighting in a thicket down slope and flipping away instantly, with a scared *ghlink-ghlink*.

To these signs his conscious mind, busy with thoughts of Joan and escape, had paid no heed; but his subconscious mind had all the time been taking them in, piecing them together, and sounding a louder and louder warning till at last the sense of danger had driven him to hiding.

A short while after he had settled down in his ambush, a family of tiny kinglets began *chee-dee-dee-ing* at something directly down slope. As Alan peered down into that thick tangle of brush and rocks, he saw a shadowy man-figure fade in behind a nest of boulders.

A shock quivered through him. Dead right, that warning of danger. Yonder stalked proof of it.

A few minutes later a snowshoe rabbit came thumping along the foot of the cliff, sat up near him and looked back, twitching its long black-tipped ears.

Alan stirred uneasily in his ambush, not knowing what to expect next. Instead of following his trail, his enemy had circled around him, down slope, and had come up to the cliff foot a hundred yards out the line. Clearly the fellow knew that his intended

victim had stopped. And just as clearly he knew, at least in a rough way, where the young white man was hiding.

It was a bit hair-raising to be up against so uncanny an enemy. Like dueling with a shadow or fighting a ghost of the woods.

"If you were wise, Smoky," Alan apostrophized the man, "you'd go get some of your buddies to help you out, instead of aiming at the honor of liquidating me all by yourself. Or if you're waiting out there to trail me back home and bag Joan too, you'll wait one heap-hell time. I can sit tight as long as you can."

A half hour passed and nothing happened. Alan had never known that a silence could be so loud or so torturing as the stillness along that cliff. He hardly knew how to explain the taut quiet. If his enemy was working up close, surely some bird or animal would have given token of him, in all that time. Maybe the man *had* backed away and gone for help. Maybe he was bringing up a whole pack of his fellows.

The uncertainty put Alan in a fearful dilemma. If he stayed where he was, he might presently find himself surrounded by ten or a dozen of those bush-lopers. If he ventured out of his hiding, a rifle might *cr-aa-ck* from a thicket and a murderous bullet cut him down.

Suddenly, in the tense stillness, he heard a faint metallic *snick* from somewhere close at hand. The

little sound snatched his breath away, for he recognized it as the muffled click of a rifle being cocked.

He had no idea where the sound had come from. He only knew that his enemy had slipped up close, unseen and unheard, and spied out his ambush, and was *drawing aim at him*.

He shrank farther down between his two boulders, to throw off his enemy's aim, and wedged himself partly in under a projecting shelf.

A tiny fragment of rotten wood fell upon his hat brim. He stared at the thing. Where had it dropped from? There were no trees over him. Only the sheer forty-foot cliff.

Cautiously he raised his head and looked up. Straight above him the end of a windfall log protruded over the lip of the rock. Beside that log, in the leafy greenness of a bracken clump, he saw a bright glint — a rifle barrel glinting in the slant afternoon sun.

He understood, then, the long quivering silence. Unable to get a glimpse of him from anywhere along the slope, his enemy had circled up on top of the cliff and come out to the edge of it, where he could look directly down into the ambush. Evidently the man could not get a clear view of him, even so, because of the laurel screen.

He wondered, flittingly, why the man had trailed him so long and passed up so many chances to shoot at him, and why the fellow had spent a whole hour

maneuvering around to get in one shot, a fatal shot. He believed he knew the explanation. Those four deaths down Sulteena. These man-hunters thought that he had encountered those four men down yonder and killed them all, there on the open water. They were in mortal fear of him.

Though he could see nothing of his enemy except that bright glint, he knew to the inch where the man was lying. Alongside the log. In that thickest mass of fronds. The rifle stuck out from that mass. The man's head and shoulders were in line with that rifle barrel.

Moving with infinite caution so that his enemy could not make out what he was doing, he slowly lifted the powerful bow, drew the arrow to its head, took a careful aim, and shot.

As the arrow whizzed into the bracken he heard a throaty inarticulate "Ugh!" A stone, a dribble of dirt, a small chunk of rotten wood, fell down upon him. His heart sank. He believed that he had made a clean miss and that the "Ugh!" was merely a surprised grunt from his enemy.

Then a rifle slid from the bracken, struck against a jutting knob, and cartwheeled down into the laurels. A few moments later Alan saw a convulsive thrashing in that green nest; the body of a half-naked Indian slipped out of it, slowly; hung for an instant on the lip of the rock; then toppled over and came plunging downward, straight down upon Alan's ambush. . . . As Alan leaped

aside, one of the Indian's arms hit him, as though striking at him even in death, and knocked the ram-horn bow from his hands.

For a little space he was so badly shaken by the ordeal of the last two minutes, when death had stared at him over a rifle barrel, that he slumped down on a rock and shut his eyes and fought to get hold of himself.

He had killed a man. He, Alan Laramie, had taken the life of a human being. The very thought appalled him. For days he had grimly sworn that since these men were gunning for him and shooting on sight, he was going to be merciless with them and kill anybody who got in his road. He felt differently now. He almost hated himself for what he had done.

But then he made himself remember that he had shot only in dire self-defense. This Indian had been trying to kill him for two hours, covetous of the glory of murdering him single-handed. This whole cruel man-hunt was a monstrous injustice. A hundred men, whom he had never wronged, whom he did not even know, were hounding him, wanting to shoot him down.

Gradually he steadied himself; and after a time he got up, retrieved his bow, looked at the Indian.

The man was the oldest of those three Waukootannahs who had brought disaster upon Joan and him up Teluwaceet.

The fluted arrow had caught the Waukootannah

in the throat, plowed upward and killed him instantly, before he could shout or even squeeze the trigger of his gun.

Alan picked up the Indian's weapon — a new rifle, evidently furnished by the Police — and hid it under some brush. Nerving himself to the unpleasant job, he gathered up the limp body of his enemy, wedged it down between the two boulders where he himself had just lain, and covered it over with leaves and moss.

After smoothing out all the signs he could see, he took up his bow and quiver and headed on for "home."

In an hour he reached the deep ravine, turned down it, and came to the big labyrinth of windfall and rocks.

As quietly as possible, to keep from startling Joan till he was close enough to whisper reassurance, he entered the upper edge of the jumble and started worming his way down through the piled-up timbers and the dank "bear alleys."

As he neared the lower end he thought he heard voices in the "living room" ahead. Stopping short, he listened. It *was* voices, low and guarded. Some man was talking to Joan.

Thunderstruck, he muscled close, foot by foot, thinking that one of their enemies had discovered their refuge and that Joan was playing some desperate game to outwit the man and save themselves from capture.

As he came within twenty feet he recognized the man's voice as Eric Norman's.

In a flash he realized that Norman was the lone canoeist whom he had seen, and that Norman must have been trying to contact them. But why? And how on earth had Norman been able to find their refuge when dozens of men, far better woodsmen than the ex-Mounted, had been combing that slope for days?

He learned, later, that the odd bit of tune which the canoeist had kept repeating was a little signal call which Eric Norman and Joan had used for each other at Lac L'Outre. Joan had heard it, looked out, and recognized Norman in the boat. Realizing that the signal was for her and that he wanted to get in touch with her and Alan, she had crept down the ravine, answered him, let him know where they were. At a safe distance on down the shore Norman had beached his canoe, made camp, idled around for a while to allay the suspicions of anybody who might have been watching, and then had slipped back up to their hiding place.

Though Alan despised eavesdropping, under ordinary circumstances, he kept silent now, inched a little closer, and listened to what Joan and Norman were saying.

Chapter Eleven

THE story which Eric Norman told Joan, in the dark windfall, was not entirely news to her. When she first had heard of the Grindley robbery, on the morning after it happened, she had suspected her father of some connection with it; and her suspicion had grown almost to a certainty by the time that Alan Laramie had come paddling in to Lac L'Outre, in the evening twilight.

But the full truth, which Norman disclosed to her now, was dreadfully worse than she had imagined. Instead of merely planning the robbery, as she had thought, her father had had an actual hand in it and had kept part of the loot. If the truth got out, "Dads" would be taken away from her and put to death.

She could not cry; the story left her too appalled for that. While Norman's quiet words beat

upon her with unmeant devastation, she sat against a log and listened in stricken silence.

Most people at Lac L'Outre, including Eric Norman, thought that Joan's devoted loyalty to her father was more than the man deserved; but such a thought had never occurred to Joan. However badly he might have gone to pieces in recent months, "Dads" had always been the most splendid of fathers to her. Other folk judged him only by the present; she had the perspective of long long years.

Every memory, as she looked back across her life, was colored and made beautiful by the companionship between her father and herself. The earliest dim recollection of her babyhood was of a spring day when "Dads" — a much younger man then, almost as young as Alan now — carried her down to the wharf and showed her the mighty spectacle of Sulteena's break-up. Then came those ecstatic wilderness trips with him, by canoe in summer, when he visited Luke's tribe or made his official calls on the "treaty" bands; by dog team in winter, when he tucked her away in a cozy fur nest on the *komatik* and headed into the mountains, to fur-trade with the nomad Nahannis and Sikannis.

Everything which she had attained beyond a mere existence had been made possible by some sacrifice on his part, some devotion to his little girl. The first debt he had ever incurred had been for her sake, to put her through high school at the Landing. During her two university years he had tailed

out a long hard trap line of his own in order to send her a bit of money, for the store was making nothing.

Even this robbery had been an attempt, a mistaken and pitiful attempt, to help her. He had thought to save her from bleak Lac L'Outre and a loveless marriage. He had wanted, before going down and out himself, to do her one last service.

Instead of alienating her, the events of the past year had drawn her closer to him, for in his need she had become a kind of mother to him as well as daughter. This year had given her a chance to pay back a part of his devotion and sacrifice. She was no longer his little girl, dependent and receiving, but his gentle nurse, his helper in the battle against Seth Grindley, and his understanding friend when all other friends had fallen away.

Throughout his troubles she had steadfastly refused to consider him a hopelessly lost person. Even now, as she listened to the account of his crime, she could not look upon him or his act as evil. In her judgment he had hardly been a responsible man. He had been sick, not evil — with a sickness that struck deeper than any illness of body. . . .

"Now, Joan," Norman hastened to assure her when he finished his story, "we're going to get your father out of this all right. Nobody suspects him. Nobody will. Before I left Lac L'Outre, I spiked any chance of suspicion there. And we're safe in regard to Thello. Our one danger is from Alan.

If Alan is taken, your father is going to give himself up. That's why I'm here — to see that Alan gets away. When he's once across the mountains into the Panhandle, we can feel safe, but not till then. When he's entirely out of the Dominion, completely cut off and forgotten about, then we can breathe easy."

"'Cut off — forgotten,'" Joan repeated, in misery. "When he's an outlaw, wandering in another country, his life all wrecked, his friends and education and plans and everything all wrecked . . . Oh, Eric, how can we do that to Alan?"

"It's unjust, dear, I'll admit. But Alan isn't the only one who's getting an injustice out of this. Since you've mentioned wreckages, I may say that this affair has wrecked me too. I'll be quite as badly off as Alan."

"No, Eric, that isn't so. You'll have money, lots of it; but Alan won't have a penny. You can get a fine position with the Provincial Police any day you want to; but Alan'll have to take the most obscure work he can find. You'll have your friends and your old life just the same; but Alan'll be an outcast, without a friend or even his own name."

"The point is, dear," Norman said, somewhat impatiently, "I've showed you the only way to save your father; I'm offering to help with it; and you've got to say 'yes' or 'no.' In a situation like this you can't possibly let your father down —— "

"But I can't let Alan down, either!"

"You'll have to do one or the other," Norman stated.

Driven into a corner by his stern logic, Joan turned away from him and buried her face in her arms. Norman waited, waited. Joan's silence astounded him. He had never thought she would hesitate for a moment, when her father's life hung in the balance. He was swept with jealousy. Her anguished indecision told him in clear language that she had fallen in love with Alan Laramie. There could be no other explanation of her silence.

He was astonished, too, at the change which had come over Joan since he and she had last talked. She was almost a different person. In three short weeks she had traveled a far way from the steady-eyed inaccessible girl whose friendship for *him* had never quickened with passion. She was no longer cool and self-contained. He had always disliked that virginal aloofness of hers, but now he hated even more to see that she had been drawn out of it. For it was Alan Laramie who had awakened her.

It was some solace to realize that, unless she did the incredible and decided against her father, Alan Laramie would shortly go out of her life altogether, while he himself would remain. She had known Laramie only a brief time, and their relationship could not have become very deep of root. In the months ahead Laramie would fade and the memory of him would dim, and then she would turn to the one who had stood by her for so long.

"I can't see why you're hesitating, Joan," he said. "You decided three weeks ago that you had to shield your father. That's why you helped Alan break jail. You've been fighting ever since to get him through this man-hunt. Why do you hesitate now?"

Still that silence from Joan. As Norman waited, he caught a glimpse of the cruel battle which had been raging within the girl for those three weeks. All along she had known that she could save Alan with a word. And she had not been able to say that word. All along she must have questioned the righteousness of sacrificing an innocent man. Now that dreadful battle had come to a head.

Sorry for her, he moved over to the dark little niche where she sat, and attempted comfort.

"Joan, dear, don't — don't beat yourself against a stone wall. Don't debate, don't punish yourself, as you're doing. There's no debate possible here. Let's accept what has to be. I've brought some money with me to give Alan so that he won't be penniless when he reaches the Coast. I'll send him more money later on and help him dig in somewhere."

Still no answer from Joan.

"Would you feel better about this, dear," Norman asked, "if I told Alan the facts and allowed him to make the choice? If he agrees to go away — and I believe I could persuade him to that — then the decision will be of his own free will; and you

wouldn't feel that *you* were making a sacrifice of him. Shall I tell Alan?"

"No, no," she cried brokenly. "He'd hate me. I don't want him to know. He'd think I've been using him. He'd never understand that I *had* to do what I've done. I couldn't bear for him to go away hating me."

Norman started a little. "He's going away, then? You've decided?"

Joan raised her head. She tried to say "Yes," but a shudder went through her and she could not say it.

Alan backed off noiselessly to the middle of the labyrinth, to ponder what he had just overheard and give Joan a chance to get hold of herself.

After nearly a month of being hounded for the Grindley killing, it felt decidedly queer to know that he could walk boldly down to the river, hail one of those Police boats, and be a free man again, if he wished. He had Joan as witness that he had nothing to do with those four deaths a few nights ago. He would stand clear of every charge. His old world wasn't dead, after all. He could resurrect it with just a few words.

He understood at last why Joan had helped him; why she had insisted on going with him on his flight; what Luke had read in her eyes at the cabin up Teluwaceet; why Luke had told her to go to Eric Norman. The revelation about Boyd Hastings'

connection with the crime surprised him very little. Though he had thrown out his original suspicion about her father, he had later swung back to it, because of a slip or two that Joan had made; and for several days now he had been positive that Boyd Hastings had had some part in that affair.

He nursed no bitterness at all toward Joan's father, for he felt that Boyd Hastings was as much sinned against as sinner. The really guilty people were Thello and Seth Grindley. Especially the latter. The greed of Trader Grindley had been the fountainhead of this whole trouble. Grindley's attempt to monopolize the Lac L'Outre fur-and-dust trade had brought on all this human suffering. Grindley's evil had spread like a plague. Norman was out of the Force, Joan was bogged down with the law, Boyd Hastings was a criminal, he himself was an outlaw, six men had already been killed on this hunt — all because of Seth Grindley's greed.

"Joan was plenty right," he thought, "when she said that the person who shot him did a thoroughly good job!"

For Joan's sake he was immensely glad to hear that Boyd Hastings was straightening up. Joan might come into pleasant times again now. Next year she might even return to the university. All her troubles would pack up and go away. Except her debt to Norman. That debt would remain, as big as a mountain. Just in this last hour it had been

jumped up enormously — Eric Norman was saving her daddy from the noose.

Norman had reminded her of that fact. And of his being out of the Mounted. Norman shouldn't have done that. Of course, both facts were true; but still Norman should have kept quiet about them instead of piling them onto the girl's conscience. . . .

After waiting a full half hour, he returned to the lower end of the windfall. A few steps from the "living room" he purposely cracked a stick, by way of knocking at the door.

"Alan?" — a whisper from Joan.

"Right!" he whispered back, and crept on in.

He affected great astonishment at finding Norman there, and gladness at the news that Norman was offering him help. But as they shook hands — warmly, in spite of their unspoken antagonism over Joan — he wished that Norman had not come. The intimate companionship between Joan and himself was ended now. Between a party of two and a party of three lay a world's difference.

Briefly Norman told him of discovering Clint Thello's guilt in the Grindley killing; but of Boyd Hastings' part in that crime Norman said nothing. Alan merely nodded to the account, accepted it, asked no probing questions. He wanted to keep Joan from the slightest suspicion that he had overheard Norman and her. He had made his decision — to go away and save Boyd Hastings; and he

wanted to go quietly, with no fanfare or display, just as he had once handed back that nickel-too-much to Joan.

"How'd you manage to find us, Eric?" he asked.

Norman told him about the signal call.

"But aren't Bernard and these others suspicious of you and keeping an eye on you?"

"I've thrown them off the track," Norman said.

"I gave out that I'm trying to capture you single-handed in order to show Bernard up. They believe it."

The three of them sat down to a council of war. They spoke in guarded whispers and they talked hurriedly, afraid that if Norman stayed away from his camp too long one of those Crees might get suspicious and trail him to this windfall.

"About your getting away, Alan," Norman went straight to the point. "Joan tells me you're set on Sulteena Pass. I don't believe you can get there, or get through it if you did. Bernard has stationed eight watchers on the upper river and ten men at the pass itself."

"But what else have we got?"

"Well, if we can break out of this surround, it seems to me that you ought to make your way back into one of these mountain valleys, find a good isolated place, and hole up. You could stay there this winter and hit for the Panhandle next spring, when the hunt has died down. That's what Thello has done. I'll help you find a place, and later on I'll

bring you an outfit and grub to last till the break-up."

Alan shook his head. He himself had thought of holing up in some secluded valley far off the main river; in fact, he and Joan had talked it over, at the grizzly cave. It was the safe course, the sane and sensible thing to do. But he knew mountains and their appalling solitude. Six or seven long months of lonely isolation, a whole winter in the frozen white immensity of those ranges, without work or human company — he could never stand it.

"It'd drive me bushed," he said. "I'd rather try for the pass. Once through that, I could keep on the move, reach the coast towns by Christmas, find work and be among human beings again."

"Better think twice," Norman urged.

"I've thought a dozen times! I'd be shaking hands with the willows by spring."

Norman saw that argument was useless. "All right," he agreed, "we'll strike on northwest. Providing, of course, we can get out of this jam here. Joan says that you're planning to portage around this narrows upstream."

Alan nodded. "I was just scouting out the chances. The best bet is to portage along that *brulé* slope over yonder."

"That looks pretty hopeless to me. We'd have to cross the river and then make a five- or six-mile carry."

"The carry would be easy enough. It's crossing

the river that I don't fancy. But we can cut it on a bad dark night. We can't this evening. The sky's clear and there'll be a full moon. We'll have to wait. Maybe tomorrow —— ”

“We don't dare wait. We've got to get out of here tonight.”

“Why tonight?”

“Bernard intends to fire this east slope tomorrow morning. He's impatient with those trackers for not finding you, so he's going to burn you out.”

Alan gasped. “Hell's bells — burning a whole mountain slope! D'you really think he will?”

“There's no question. And it won't take him two hours. The wind is right, and there haven't been any recent rains, and the timber's dry.”

Alan had taken so many blows in the last three weeks that this news did not affect him much. He merely commented:

“When that fellow ties into a job, he doesn't mean maybe. Not to slam you at all, Eric, but the hunt you staged for Joan and me was a little tea party compared to what we've been up against since he took hold.”

“He knows his business,” Norman assented glumly. “I must say that he's handled some of the toughest assignments in the Force, and he's never fluked a case in fourteen years.”

“That doesn't sound so good for us. Well, I guess we'll have to tackle crossing the river tonight, unless —— ”

He paused there, wrestling with the ghost of an idea.

"Unless what?" — Joan and Norman both asked the same question.

Alan thrummed on a log, thoughtfully. He had prayed for rain and wind and pitch darkness that evening; but instead of that, luck was handing him a clear sky and a full moon. And tomorrow this slope would be set afire.

"Do you know those men up yonder at the narrows, Eric?" he asked. "Know 'em well, I mean?"

"Yes. Clancy's in charge of that posse. I ate lunch with them today. Why?"

Alan continued thrumming on the log. After a time he asked, "D'you suppose, Eric, that you could smuggle Joan and me through that bottleneck up there?"

"'Smuggle' — ?"

"Hide us in your boat and take us through."

"Good heavens! Past two dozen men and those searchlights? *No!*"

"Well, I'm not exactly wild about the idea myself, but show me something better. If we start across the river on a night like this, we'll be bumped off; and if we stay here we'll be roasted. You've got a twenty-foot boat and a considerable pile of things in it. If those fellows really think that you're out to get me, they'll never suspect you. They mightn't even glance at your canoe."

"No," Norman repeated. "It'd be taking a frightful risk."


"We've taken plenty, Joan and I. And look! — if we did get through, we'd be out of this pot of trouble, we'd have a good swift motorboat under us, we could make that pass in forty-eight hours!"

For minutes they argued it back and forth, with Joan taking Alan's side. Unable to suggest any likelier scheme, Norman finally had to give in.


"I don't like the idea at all," he insisted, "but I guess we've got to try it. They really didn't search my canoe today. We may slip through."

They talked the plan over in detail, swiftly, for the sun had already slanted down behind the western range.

Then Norman crept out of the windfall, edged into the woods, and started for his camp down shore.



Chapter Twelve



ALAN began packing their outfit. He took only part of it, only the barest necessities. Too much equipment in Norman's boat would make Clancy's posse suspicious.

He was loath to give up old Luke's canoe, which had brought Joan and him so many miles. The swift little craft, with the semi-mysterious lines of an Indian birchbark, had become like a silent partner on their flight. Gray-mottled and low, it was all but invisible on dim waters. In it they had slipped unseen through posses, drifted unseen past look-outs, veered away from patrol canoes unglimped. The newsmen in their wirelessly stories about the hunt were calling it "the phantom canoe", Norman had said; and Alan, who knew from a dozen close shaves how shadowy and phantomlike it truly was, hated to part with the craft. It had brought luck to him and Joan; and he felt that when he left

it behind he might also be leaving his luck behind.

Instead of cheering him, the prospect of escape which Norman's coming had opened up — the best prospect since over on the Teluwaceet — had plunged him into the bluest dejection of that entire trip. Until an hour ago he had been able to hope, if only remotely, that Seth Grindley's murderer might accidentally be caught by one of these posses, with the stamped furs in his possession. But after hearing what Norman had said about the elusive Thello, he could no longer hope that. Nor could he even wish for it. Thello would squeal.

Like Norman, he was actually compelled to wish that the man who had robbed and framed him would keep free of the law.

As he packed up he glanced occasionally at Joan, who was gazing through the crisscross logs at cold broad Sulteena. Motionless and silent, she looked unwordably desolate. He knew what was preying on her — his outlawry, the obscure and fugitive life ahead for him. Norman was willing enough that he should be sacrificed, but not Joan. It was cutting her to the heart.

He thought it cruel that Norman and himself and her daddy, the three men who loomed largest in her life, should every one be cause of anguish to Joan. In one way or another all three of them had piled trouble on her. Right now he himself was the worst offender. "Oh, Eric, how can we do that

to Alan?" — that's what she had said to Norman. That's what was tearing at her now.

Purple dusk had settled over Sulteena by the time he finished packing. On the upturned canoe he set out a cold supper — some scanty remains of the food which they still had from their stay at the grizzly cave.

"We'd better eat a bite, kiddy."

"I don't want anything, Alan."

In spite of his own blue mood Alan went over to her and made an effort to cheer her up. "I'll stop her from worrying about *me!*" he swore. "Damned if *I'll* be a load on her, like her daddy and Norman." He sat down, took her small hand in his. How cold and listless it was!

"I think we're going to slip through that narrows tonight without a bit of trouble, honey — don't you?"

"I hope so," Joan said, without spirit.

He tried another tack. "When I stepped out to this windfall edge with Eric a while ago, Joan, he told me that your dad is 'coming back.' I'm awfully glad. You've been through a tough siege, girl, but from now on you'll be on the up and up. Your dad won't have Grindley cutthroating him; he'll shake out of his slump and get on his feet again. I don't know him much, but he must be a pretty good fellow to be *your* daddy. Some of these days you'll be leaving Lac L'Outre and going back to the university — "

"But where'll *you* be?" Joan interrupted.

That gave Alan the opening he wanted. With as manful a lie as he could muster up, he struck hard and straight at the heart of her trouble.

"Listen, honey," he said, trying to make his words ring genuine, "while I was alone today on that scouting trip, I sat in a laurel thicket at the foot of a cliff and did a lot of cogitating. About myself, mostly. It made me feel a world better. I've done considerable grumping, I know, about the poke-in-the-jaw that luck has handed me — everything wrecked and plans all gone to pot; but if a person gets right down to brass facts, I'm not going to be so bad off, really. Anyhow, things could be a pile worse."

Careful not to appear too cheerful, he went on: "Of course, I hate to give up the university, but that's about all. Sometimes a jolt like this is the making of a man. I'm young, I'm not established professionally, my name doesn't mean a toot, so I'm not losing much. I think I'll travel around for a coupla years. I always did have an itchy hoof, and this'll be a top-hole chance to go places and see things. I'll be free, white and twenty-one, with the whole wide world in front of me; and what more can a fellow ask? Travel, ships, foot-loose wandering . . . Why, kiddy, in six months from now I'll be sending you a letter from Borneo or Madagascar —"

He checked himself abruptly, suddenly aware that

he had struck a wrong note, a terribly wrong note. At mention of those far-off lands, Joan's fingers tightened upon his, and she quavered:

"You'll be — be clear on the other side of the *world!*" The partnerly front which she had maintained toward him on their flight came very near to breaking down. "Alan! Don't go that far away. I — I wouldn't ever see you again."

Her words astounded Alan. Why, she was talking as though she wanted and hoped to see him again sometime. As though she didn't want him to go out of her life. Why should it make any difference to her whether he was in Alaska or Borneo or Timbuktu?

He remembered how she had fought that afternoon against Norman's plan to sacrifice him, and remembered her long strange silence before she finally bowed her head to that plan. Maybe she did like him, at least a little bit. Maybe, if he had a chance, he could make her like him a whole lot.

A hopeless wish jiggled across his thoughts. . . . Why couldn't Joan go on with him, on through Sulteena Pass and across the ranges to the Coast? The outlaw trail would not be lonely or bleak if he and she were traveling it in company. Somewhere in Alaska or down in the western States they could take up a fresh new life together.

But he did not word this aching wish to Joan. He knew she could not go. Duty and heavy responsibility bound her to Lac L'Outre. And what

did he have to offer her if she did go? Danger, poverty, hardship, and unknown harassments of a fugitive existence. What a fine wedding present to give a girl! What a fine life to ask her to share!

He gave up his attempt to encourage her. It was altogether useless. He realized that her big trouble, and his own also, was the fact that they had nothing happy or sunlit to look forward to, and a person without hope was cursed indeed. The road ahead was bleak and empty for both of them. He was going into the outcast's obscurity. She was returning to that dingy post, to the store and her dad and — Eric Norman.

As soon as it was dark enough they left the wind-fall and went down through the woods to Norman's camp.

The patrolling canoes were already abroad on the river — long dancing shadows yonder on the water. The moon was so bright that one could see the boats half across the wide Sulteena.

When they came near Norman's camp they found that the canoe patrolling that particular strip of shore had stopped off, and the two men were having a sociable cup of tea with the former Mounted officer.

In a juniper clump they waited till the pair had gone on. At Alan's low signal Norman stepped back to the thicket.

"Ready?" Alan asked. "The sooner we shove

away, the better. We can get in a long strike to-night."

Norman seemed hesitant. "Alan, I believe we should change our plans a bit."

"How?"

"I've been looking my boat over and arranging the stuff in it this way and that, and . . . To put it briefly, I can hide one person pretty well, there in the prow; but I can't work out any arrangement for two people that doesn't look downright suspicious. You can see for yourself. One person, one big bulge, will be risk enough. Two will be a give-away."

"But if you make two trips through that narrows, those men will be sure to catch on."

"I was meaning to make just one trip. To take just you."

"*What!* But Joan — what about her?"

"Joan ought to stay here," Norman said. "You and I ought to hit northwest alone."

"Stay here — when they're going to burn this slope tomorrow morning? How can she?"

"I thought of that. She can take your canoe and slip out yonder" — Norman pointed at a marshy islet a pistol-shot offshore. "They won't burn that place. She'll be safe."

"But she'll be caught and arrested —"

"She's got to give herself up sometime," Norman countered. "She can't possibly get out of doing that."

"But if she's caught, Bernard'll get wise that I've

slipped away," Alan argued. The idea of leaving Joan alone there went against the grain with him. "Bernard'll know I'm heading for the pass. He'll throw the whole hunt up river after you and me, and we'll be stopped cold."

"I thought of that too. These men have searched that island out there. I just questioned those two and made sure. So they won't be likely to search it again. Joan can hide there for forty-eight hours, and then give herself up." He added, "We don't need her on our run for the watershed. I know the upper Sulteena."

"But damn it, we oughtn't to leave her here just because we don't need her any more!"

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm thinking of Joan's safety quite as much as ours. We're going to encounter trouble up above, especially at the pass. Likely we'll have a rifle battle with those ten men there. If you insist on her going along, you're not only cutting down your own chances but exposing her to the thoroughly unnecessary danger of getting killed. Do you want to do that?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, then!"

Alan groped for answer to Norman's logic, but there was no answer. If Joan stayed behind, her risks would all be ended, and his chance of getting through the narrows would be greatly enhanced.

But he had counted on her going as far as the

watershed, and he was all taken aback at this unexpected prospect of parting from her.

And he had a suspicion that Norman, over and above the perfectly sound reasons he had advanced, was using this situation as a lever to pry him and Joan apart.

"What do you think about this, Joan?" he asked. "You've got a say-so too. Eric and I haven't any right to wrap you up and address you."

He thought Joan would side with him, but to his surprise she sided with Norman. She had made up her mind while they were arguing; and without hesitation she said quietly:

"I mustn't cut down your chances, Alan. They're slim enough already. I wouldn't be of any help. I can't help you any more at all, Alan — except by staying here."

"You're choosing the wise course, Joan," Norman said, while Alan was silent in defeat. "Now let me instruct you what to do. You'll get out to that island easily enough, and you'll have little trouble keeping hidden. You won't have trouble of any sort except a lonesome day or two. When you do come out and give yourself up, don't let Bernard browbeat you into making admissions damaging to yourself. Silence is your right, and stick to it. They'll put you in jail at Lac L'Outre or the Landing, but don't allow that to worry you. When I come back down the river in a few days, I'll get a lawyer on this job, and get you out on bail. I'll fight the

case till the Police either drop it or give you a suspended sentence."

Alan swore, in silent exasperation. Another debt from Joan to Norman. It was an honest kindness, this court battle in her behalf; but like all Norman's other kindnesses it was also another mortgage on the girl.

"If you'll go back and get the canoe for Joan, Alan, I'll be arranging the packs in my boat," Norman said; and he walked down to the land-wash.

A little dazed and bewildered, Alan and Joan stared in silence at each other. All along they had known that sometime they would have to part, but the actual parting had come upon them so suddenly that they were totally unprepared for it. For days that seemed weeks and for weeks that seemed like long months they had been together constantly; and they could not fully realize that now they were really separating.

"Can I go along, Alan, to get the canoe?"

"Why — why, yes," he said.

Holding each other's hand, they started out through the dark woods, over the plushy moss and through the splashes of brilliant moonlight.

Their footsteps dragged as they approached the windfall. These minutes were their last together. This little walk was their last.

"I'll get a letter to you, Joan," Alan said, as they crossed an open space. "We'll have to be careful;

the Mounted will be watching your mail sharp. But we'll keep in touch."

In the ghostly light he saw Joan wince. The same anguishing realization struck him too. A stray letter, a fugitive note from a thousand miles distant — that was all they were to have of each other from this night on.

"Oh, Alan," she broke out, "I don't want to — to just keep in touch!" With a love that she no longer could fight back, she stammered, "I — I want to hope that sometime I'll — somewhere we'll — we'll be together again."

Alan stopped short, in that big sward of moon through the pines; and as he confronted Joan even his blind eyes could not fail to see that she liked him far more than a little bit.

"You — you really mean that — Joan?" he asked. He was staggered. "That's what you said — 'together, sometime.'"

"I do — I do mean it, Alan. We've been such good friends, we've become — become so — so close —"

"Why *can't* we be together again, Joan?" he broke in, with a fierce recklessness. "We can! We will! Say we will!" And when she was silent, he insisted, "Say it! Say we will!"

"We will, Alan."

Their handclasp suddenly tightened. Their miserable and hollow attempt at partnership broke down completely. In an instant they were in each

other's arms, clinging to each other, whispering meaningless words. Alan kissed her hair, her tear-wet cheeks, her lips.

"Promise you'll wait for me, Joan sweetheart — wait till I get squared around somewhere."

"Promise you'll wait for *me* till I — till everything at Lac L'Outre — till I can leave there."

"I'll send for you, sweet."

"I'll come — when you — send, Alan."

"I won't pitch away off, like I said, Joan. I'll stay in Alaska. There's lots of work in my field there. We'll be right close. Just across some mountains. I'll stay there and work hard —— "

"And I'll work hard." . . .

As they went on to the windfall and secured the canoe and returned through the dark woods, they were two different people from the hopeless and despondent pair they had been all evening. Now they had a hope, however remote and moon-inspired. A hope of being with each other again. It was something to live for. Something to go on fighting for.

At the juniper thicket they stopped. Alan put down the birchbark, glanced at Norman on the landwash and turned to Joan, still unable to believe this miracle of her love for him. The moon-sheen in her hair brought him a host of poignant memories of her, memories which he knew he would never forget. Of the time he had studied her across the trading counter. Of the Police cell and the light

spangles in her hair when she handed him that key to his freedom. Of those sweet evenings when they sat at the mouth of the grizzly cave and talked till deep into the night.

He offered Joan his hand, awkwardly. "I guess this is our so-long, partner," he said. The handclasp was habit, and the "partner" was habit too. He could not get used, in a few minutes, to this new and bewildering miracle.

"Not — not a handshake, Alan," Joan whispered. She stood tiptoe, and her arm went about his shoulder. "Kiss me, dearest — good-by — "

Moments later they were parted by a voice from near at hand — the cautious and somewhat cold tones of Eric Norman.

"I'm ready, Laramie — whenever you are."

Chapter Thirteen

FROM the juniper thicket Joan watched Norman shove the motorboat into the current, start the engine and head upstream.

The boat grew shadowy, dim, and finally was swallowed in the river mist.

For a short time the wake waves of the boat rippled against the landwash. Then they stopped, but in the silence the *chugg-gg chug-gg* of the craft came pulsing back to Joan distinctly.

As the boat rounded a headland the sound became a little less plain, and its sharp rhythm became confused with the wavy echoes beating against the mountain slopes; but still she could hear it well.

She knew where that headland was—a short mile from the narrows; and in vision she followed the motor-canoe as it butted on. It was nearing that bottleneck now. The searchlights were throw-

ing their yellow lanes across the water and picking it up. The patrolling canoes and the men ashore were eying it suspiciously. The lights were playing on the boat. On Eric, sitting nonchalantly in the stern. On those carelessly tossed packs in the prow. Through the tarpaulin flung over him Alan perhaps could see the glare of those prying lights. Perhaps Eric was taking his hands from the tiller, cupping a match, lighting a pipe.

Now the boat had reached the lower end of the narrows, and Alan was in the midst of two dozen enemies. The next minute, two minutes — escape for Alan, safety for Dads . . . She shut her eyes, stopped breathing.

All suddenly the *chugg-gg chug-gg* silenced. The pulsing echoes died away from the mountain slopes, and a dead quiet drifted down Sulteena.

Joan's heart turned cold. One of those canoes must have skirled alongside the boat and discovered what the tarpaulin hid. Or else Constable Clancy, suspicious of this night trip that Eric was making, had ordered the boat ashore to be searched.

She waited for rifle shots, signal shots — spreading the news up and down Sulteena that Alan Laramie had been taken. But no shots came. Maybe Eric, cagey and diplomatic, had deliberately nosed in to that camp and stopped! To chat. To kill suspicion with an expert show of unconcern. That must be it! She visioned Eric talking with Clancy, in the glare of those lights. Visioned the other men

standing around the motorboat, so near that they could have touched Alan with their rifle muzzles!

As suddenly as it had stopped, the *chugg-gg chug-gg* started up again. A bit spluttery for the first few moments, then in even rhythmic cadence, it drifted down Sulteena and beat in waves against that fire-gutted western slope, bringing its blessed reassurance that the motorboat was going on, up the narrows, on northwest. Eric had played a bold hand and won. He had taken Alan through!

Weak and trembly, Joan leaned against a tree, with all the tenseness suddenly gone out of her. The reaction from the strain of that fearful quiet left her shaky, nerveless. Now that the danger was past, her heart began thumping again; but it thumped so hard that she felt giddy and a little faint.

The motorboat was a long time beating up through that mile of swift waters. As Joan listened, she imagined Eric sitting in the stern, still with that air of cool indifference; imagined Alan lifting a corner of the tarpaulin, nodding "Good work!" to Eric and then flipping a triumphant "See you in Alaska!" to the men downstream.

The drone rapidly grew fainter, and she knew the motorboat had reached the straight quiet stretch above the narrows. As the craft stood on northwest, the direct sound of it died out altogether, and she could hear only its weak uncertain echoes against the *brulé* slope.

In a few minutes more these too died out, the boat was gone, and Joan was alone with the night silence.

Her job now, as she conceived it, was to evade capture till her two menfolk made Sulteena Pass. It would be no easy task. She would have to hold out for two days and nights against the hundred men concentrated on that strip of river; and she would not have the windfall labyrinth to hide in, for tomorrow morning this east slope would be set afire.

She looked out at the islet, studied it. Low and willow-covered, it was hardly bigger than a garden plot, with a bed of flags at the lower end, and at the upper side a few small hemlocks and two drift piles. She doubted Eric's assurance that the place would provide secure hiding. Eric didn't fully realize how very much this hunt had tightened down.

Planning her little sortie out to the islet, she began watching the patrol canoe as it went up and down past her. She could see the two men in it, see the gleam of their wet paddle blades, hear their occasional words to each other. They were keeping on the alert, with their rifles in their laps; and the slightest noise along the shore or on the river made them whirl and look.

On its downstream swing the craft was out of sight for about six minutes. Not a very long while, Joan thought, in which to lug her outfit to the land-wash, get across the hundred-yard channel and hide

herself. No leeway at all. She would have to work fast and time her dash to the split minute.

Fifteen miles northwest a small bank of wool-pack had detached itself from a cloud-mass above a towering peak, and was floating slowly southeast down the sky. Gauging its direction, she believed it would drift across the face of the moon. If so, it would darken the waters, and she would have a few minutes longer to get over to that island. At any rate, the chance was worth waiting for. She had all night to make those hundred yards.

Though the last whispery echoes of the motor-canoe had long since died out, she fancied she could still hear the craft plainly, beating on and on northwest, whittling down the miles of Alan's dash for the Sulteena *haut d'en pays*.

She believed now, for the first time, that Alan really was going to get through the pass and into the ranges beyond. With a storm of warring emotions inside of her, she listened tearfully to those ghostly unheard echoes that were taking Alan away. Glad though she was, for her father's sake — profoundly glad that "Dads" was no longer shadowed by the gallows — yet she was afraid that those echoes might be taking Alan out of her life altogether. All that she had of him now was a promise, and the memory of his kiss and his strong arms. Slender weapons those memories were, against the very hard and factual problems ahead for her.

She told herself that she would never give in but

would wait, however long, till her father did not need her so badly; then she would leave Lac L'Outre and the Dominion and go to Alan, wherever he might be — if he still wanted her.

Their promise to each other, their plan for her to join him, did not seem at all fantastic to her just then. In the night stillness, in the silver moonlight that was touching the river and the mountains to magic, nothing seemed impossible. She was only sorry that she had not promised Alan sooner, instead of fighting him off for three weeks and then giving way at the last moment.

The woolpack had shredded out into a sheet of cloud; but it was still heavy enough to darken the river, and it was nearing the moon. Joan watched it, watched the patrol canoe. The latter passed her and glided on down stream; the cloud floated over the moon and dimmed it — and her chance had come.

Working swiftly, she lugged the birchbark through the thicket, across the landwash, to the water edge. Then she ran back for paddle, pack and blanket roll, darted down to the canoe with them, poled out of the shallows, skirled across the hundred-yard channel, pushed in among the flags and willows of the islet, and was safe!

Beneath a pile of driftwood she hid the canoe securely. Hunting around, she found a little hollow under the other drift lodgment where the ground was fairly dry. After enlarging the niche and prop-

ping brush around it so as to shut out view when day broke, she spread her blankets inside of it and established herself comfortably.

The dampness, the peculiar smell of muddy river débris, the flags and lapping waters all around, reminded her of the driftwood refuge where she and Alan had spent a day up Teluwaceet. Queer homes that he and she had had, on their flight. Log piles, ravines, rock jumbles, bear dens! And yet happy places. She remembered every one of them. What with the autumnal rains and the difficulty of finding good camping spots in darkness, few of those places had been as comfortable as this niche that she had happened upon. Yet this refuge, her last one, seemed inexpressibly bleak and lonely in comparison with those others.

With a blanket about her shoulders she leaned back against a log and peered through the screen of brush at the patrol canoe. She had no expectation at all of going to sleep, with those ghostly echoes still drifting down Sulteena; and she was afraid that if she went to sleep she might cough and attract attention, for her cold had come back upon her. So she propped herself up and tried to stay awake.

The strain of the last few hours had tired her more than she knew, and she had caught little sleep in the past two nights. Within an hour her eyelids were drooping heavily. Rousing herself, she ate some of the venison and other food which Alan

had given her; crept out to the river edge and bathed her face in the cold water; came back and resolutely propped herself up again.

But her tiredness, the lulling murmur of the wavelets, the whisper of wind in the flags and willows, proved entirely too much. Her eyelids drooped more and more; she kept slipping farther and farther down, till at last she was lying on the ground, asleep.

When Joan awoke, gray dawn had already broken. She was stiff and chilled; the moon and its magic touch had gone; and the Sulteena, so weirdly beautiful only a few hours ago, was a sullen cold river now.

The day was raw, sunless, ugly. A sharp wind was sweeping down the valley, and a scum of cloud from the north was threatening rain or snow before many hours.

Instead of going in to camp at dawn, as they had been doing, the patrol canoes were still out upon the river. At intervals of about a thousand yards they had taken station in the middle of the stream, with the men in them dipping an occasional paddle against the current.

She wondered what those men were doing out there; what they were waiting for.

In the prosaic light of day she looked back upon last night as a little dream interlude, a fantasy which already had begun to fade. The gray realities

of life had risen up again, massive and overlooming. The promise between her and Alan seemed a bit of madness, born of the moon and their panic at parting. Her pledge to wait for him and join him sometime in some distant land seemed impossible of fulfillment. She would return to isolated Lac L'Outre. The months would drag by. She might stave off the inevitable for a year, but in the end it would not be Alan that she would join, would marry.

She hated people who would take and take without giving — and she had known several such people. She despised welching in any shape or form. For nearly two years she had been taking and taking from Eric Norman. She had accepted his help with the full knowledge that he loved her and expected to marry her. Now she must make return. If she defaulted she would be a welcher of the worst sort. . . .

A little after sunrise she saw a spiral of blue smoke curl above the treetops on the east mountain slope, up near the narrows. Almost immediately other wisps of smoke, a dozen or more of them, began arising, all up and down that mountainside.

The thick timber, the forest carpet of needles and dry autumn leaves, and especially the stiff wind, made an ugly combination. Within a few minutes the flames were shooting above the trees; the fires began eating their way together, began working down valley toward her.

She understood, then, why those canoes had been

stationed up and down Sulteena. They were waiting for her and Alan to be driven out upon the stream.

Fanned by the strong breeze, the separate fires rapidly burned together, merged into one, became a solid wall of flame and flame-shot smoke, from the water edge clear to timberline.

That hundred-yard channel between her and the shore made her feel safe enough. The fire would never reach out to her islet, she believed. The heat and smoke might be bad for a time, but that was all.

As she watched the awesome spectacle she felt an intense anger at Inspector Raoul Bernard. Anybody who'd burn a beautiful river valley, destroy a virgin forest, drive a thousand wilderness creatures from their homes — that person ought to be burned himself!

Faster and faster, creating its own draw-wind and picking up speed almost visibly, the forest blaze came sweeping south, like a horde of red-lanced demons. Its crackling swelling roar came to Joan. The wind brought her a first hint of its fiery breath and stinging smoke. Terror-stricken birds arose up ahead of it and mounted straight into the air on frantic wings; and she imagined she could hear the bleat and cry of frightened creatures all along that slope.

She became frightened herself. Still two miles away and only fairly started, what would that holocaust be when it was a scant three hundred feet from her? What if it reached out a red tongue and touched her

islet to fire? She must not show herself on the river. *Must* not! If she was captured, that whole man-hunt — launches, boats, plane and all — would go streaking up Sulteena after Alan and Eric.

Faster than a person could run, the fire swept on and on toward her, roaring like a tornado, flinging its blazing débris and heavy pall of smoke hundreds of feet into the air. Up along the shore she saw caribou, several wolves, a moose, four or five bears and a whole host of smaller creatures break out of the woods and dash into the water and start swimming, aimlessly, in bewildered terror.

The heat of the fire became intense; the smoke of it stung her nose and eyes. Watching up the shore, noting how far out the blazing pine branches and strips of birch paper were being flung, she still believed that her little islet would escape. But could she bear that withering heat and stifling smoke? Some of those canoes upstream had had to back away though they were three times as far offshore as she.

From the juniper thicket across the channel a deer came running, splashed through the shallows, swam to her islet, snorting and coughing, and lay belly-deep among the flags just below her. A bear, a small grizzly, lumbered across the landwash, started swimming in her direction. Through the smoke she dimly saw a huge timber wolf pacing the wave edge, fear-stricken but loath, like its kind, to take to water.

Then the fire came roaring down that last half mile; the smoke stung her eyes so badly and rolled over the river in so thick a pall that she could see nothing; and she found herself, like those creatures of the wild, fighting for breath, for her life. The wind was like a blast from a furnace. The smoke blinded and stifled. Her good sense warned her to get her canoe and dart out upon that river while she still had time. But she refused to consider that. This islet was her fort, and she must stick with it. To stay uncaptured was her particular job. She mustn't let Eric and Alan down. If she could only hold out for a few minutes more, till that red hurricane had roared past —

Smothered and gasping, she groped for a blanket, crept out of her niche. As the wall of fire swept across the windfall labyrinth and roared down to the juniper thicket, she stumbled blindly into the flags, waded into waist-deep water, made a little tent over her head with the wet blanket.

It was endurable then, the heat and the smoke. In a minute or two she lifted a corner of her tent, thinking to look out and see whether the islet had caught; but the hundred-foot wall of fire was just then roaring past, the terrible heat struck her like a blow, the hot acrid smoke seared to her lungs. Gasping, she dropped the blanket corner, sank deeper into the protecting water, and waited, clinging stubbornly to her part of the job, her "fort."

Minutes later, when the fire had swept past and

the smoke had thinned a bit, she ventured to raise the blanket again. Of the mountain slope, blackened, burned to the rocks and soil, she could see nothing, because of the smoke. Down valley she heard that fearful crackling roar, sweeping on to the south. In several places her islet was smoldering, but it had not caught.

As she bathed her stinging eyes and looked about among the flags, she was struck with consternation. In that haven a whole little menagerie of animals had found refuge. They were all around her, coughing and snorting, at truce with one another and with her. A buck deer and two broad-antlered caribou. The huge timber wolf. A small grizzly bear — so close she could have splashed water on him — whimpering unhappily, like a big wet dog. Half a dozen weasels clinging to the flags. Bedraggled rabbits swimming about, their round eyes wide with terror. A red fox. Several pine martens and a fisher. And one dirty-brown carcajou, evil-eyed and scowling — the only unsociable and malevolent creature in her little refugee flock.

Chapter Fourteen

ON THEIR strike for Sulteena Pass, Norman and Alan pushed steadily northwest throughout that first night and half the next day.

They were stopped four times by hidden look-outs, who pounced out at them from headlands and islands; but those men saw only Norman in the motor-canoe, and they let him go on unquestioned, never suspecting what the tarpaulin and packs concealed.

Toward noon an icy rain and a high wind drove them ashore. Desperately impatient, they tried twice that afternoon to launch the boat and go on; but the mountain gale was lashing the river to fury, and they were swamped both times.

Through the rest of that day and the black stormy night that followed, they were held to camp.

The next morning the rain had slackened; and

though the Sulteena still ran wild with whitecaps they got the boat launched and started on, battling wind and choppy waves.

A little before noon on that second day they heard a staccato drone to the south, and the red Bellanca came winging up Sulteena. At first they thought the plane was taking food and supplies to those ten men at the pass; but when the ship caught sight of the motor-canoe on the river below, it veered toward the boat, nosed steeply down and roared overhead, so low that the boat was tossed violently by the blast of the slipstream.

The plane circled the canoe three times — a great angry hornet buzzing around a water bug. The pilot, a Mounted Policeman and four other men stared down.

Then the ship glided up river a thousand yards, touched, bumped along on the rough waves, sat down splashily; and came taxying back down current on easy revv, straight toward the boat.

Norman turned pale as he stared at the approaching plane. Alan raised a corner of the tarpaulin, glanced at the ship.

"Eric, we're in a hole. They've got a hunch I'm with you. They eyed this boat like a counterfeit bill." Keeping hidden, he reached for his rifle and thrust a cartridge into the chamber. "Say, how does a fellow put a plane out of whack?"

"You keep that gun down. They're six against us two, and that plane can taxi twice as fast as

this boat can run. They'll riddle us if we start any gunplay. Look at those rifle barrels poking out of that cabin window."

"Don't I see 'em? That's the point — if they get us in under those guns, we'll be up the old creek."

"Let's make sure, first, that they don't just want to palaver me. Stay under cover."

As the two craft approached each other, the Mounted Policeman, a corporal from the Landing detachment, clambered out of the cabin, stepped down upon a pontoon, and with a curt gesture ordered the boat to halt.

Norman engined down a bit and swerved out of the direct path of the plane.

"What do you want?" he called across at the corporal, above the spluttery revv of the Bellanca motor.

The corporal's answer was short and emphatic. "Want you and Laramie! You're under arrest. Don't try any smart tricks, and don't touch that rifle of yours. Nose that boat over this way."

With four guns covering him across a scant seventy yards of open water, Norman obediently swung the motor-canoe toward the plane.

"Alan!" he said sharply. "You were right — we've got to put that plane out of commission." He kept his lips immobile so that the men in the ship could not see him talking. "Listen to me. Do you see that little panel under the plane wing?"

"Next to the fuselage? Yes."

"That covers a wing tank. Ease your rifle up — I don't dare make a move for mine — and put a clip of bullets through that panel. If you hit that, you'll cause them plenty of grief in short order; and I'll cut and run for it."

In Alan's cramped position under the tarpaulin it was hard for him to line his rifle on the plane, and harder still to draw aim on that little panel, with the plane moving and the boat rocking under him. But he took his time. If he missed, those rifles would crack down on him and Norman.

"Hurry it, for heaven's sake!" Norman urged, as the interval shrank to less than forty yards.

Alan steadied his arm, took the best aim he could, and emptied his clip at the wing panel.

The concussion of his rifle under the heavy canvas nearly deafened him; the powder fumes blurred his eyes; and at the last crack of the rifle Norman swung the boat sharply and went scooting away from the plane.

"Did I hit?" Alan yelled. He had heard a dullish explosion, and dimly he had caught a glimpse of a sudden red flare shooting out from that left wing; but he could not see clearly.

"Did you hit? Lord!"

Alan pushed off the tarpaulin, sat up, dipped a handful of water to bathe his eyes, and looked at the plane.

The left wing had nearly been torn off by the explosion; flames were licking against the cabin side,

creeping back along the fuselage, enveloping the whole ship.

"Eric! Swing back there. That plane's a goner. Those fellows'll drown."

Before Norman could swing around, the quick-witted pilot, knowing that his ship was doomed, opened the engine full gun and sent the burning plane skimming across current to the shallows, a mass of fire. The men leaped out. Two of them whose clothes were aflame rolled in the water. The pilot stood cursing.

The Mounted corporal beat out a spot of fire on his trouser leg, coolly knelt on the muddy land-wash and lined a magazine of bullets across at Alan and Norman.

The latter swung the motor-canoe away to a safer distance, and for a few moments he and Alan watched the fiercely burning plane.

Norman gestured to the southeast. "Bernard, down there, has found out that I'm taking you up Sulteena. They must have captured Joan."

"I'll bet you a leg they *didn't* catch her! But they've got wise to us, all right, somehow. That pilot aimed straight at us the minute he sighted your boat. He was looking for us and nobody but. My guess is that Clancy's men, there at the narrows, told Bernard about you coming north; and when Bernard burned that slope and I didn't show up, he added two and two."

"He's shrewd enough, damn him!"

"How far from here to the pass?"

"Fifty miles, about. And we'll have to paddle the last twenty. At Babische Falls we'll have to dump the motor. The river on above is one portage after another, and tough ones at that."

"Then we'd better start laying down tall tracks. That launch is whooping it hell-for-leather up this river after us. We bumped this plane off, all right, but that launch is a horse of a different color."

Norman opened the motor, and they headed on up stream. Their hopes for a secret get-away and a secret run for the watershed had gone to smash. Bernard had caught on, and the man-hunt was rolling up Sulteena on their heels.

They both took up their paddles, and Alan moved back to the middle thwart, where he could stroke harder than in the prow. With paddles they could add a couple of miles an hour to their speed; and they flung themselves into the work, falling into a quick jerk-stroke that helped the little motor considerably.

That big launch was what they dreaded, more than they had feared the plane, more than they dreaded the rifle battle awaiting them at the pass. With a machine gun on its bow deck and a row of paddle craft on its stern, that launch was overhauling them, traveling three miles to their one, bringing twenty or twenty-five rifle-armed men. They had no idea how near it might be. They only knew

that they must beat it to Babische Falls. At the falls the launch would be stopped, and the pursuit party would have to take to paddles.

Keeping a vigilant watch downstream, they fought the weary miles on and on toward Sulteena Pass, butting across wind-choppy lakes, shearing headlands to the yard, skirting close around the feet of mountains.

Alan was heartened by the knowledge that this was his last dash. By tomorrow morning he would be lost to pursuit in the western ranges, or would be a prisoner — or dead.

He turned once to remark: "Now *you're* in trouble too, Eric, with old John Law. Those men saw you with me, and we shot up that plane. Seems as though anybody who touches me gets into trouble. Luke got killed, Joan's bogged down, and now you."

"Forget it," Norman bade. "I'll get out of my trouble all right. I wasn't in the Police ten years for nothing."

As the afternoon wore along, the weather faired off, the late sun broke through the scattered clouds, the stiff wind died down a little.

At the head of a long lake they rounded a mountain flank, gazed northwest and had their first sight of the Big Portage, thirty miles away.

"Look!" Alan pointed with his paddle at the great V-cleft. The towering ranges on either side of it glistened white in the slant sun, but the notch itself was a pale hazy blue. "No snow there! That's a

break for us. Instead of plowing through drifts and leaving tracks, I'll go across that big tote at a gallop."

"If we get that far," Norman amended, with a glance downstream.

As Alan gazed at the vista on northwest, the wildness of that Sulteena *haut d'en pays* overawed him, though he had lived half his life among mountains. Far wilder than the upper Teluwaceet, it was an elemental region of clouds and waters, of naked rocks and perpetual snow, of apple-green sky and flinty-blue glacial ice. Only the Sulteena valley was timbered, scantily — with storm-tortured banksian and lodgepoles. Without trees or the softening touch of any greenery, the majestic mountains rose up stark and rugged two miles against the sky, with slow clouds veiling their peaks like the smoke of peace at a conclave of hoary old giants.

Great sprawly ice fields, many-tentacled as an octopus, rode the ranges; and the gleaming white snow fields stretched for thousands of acres. Countless torrents came stair-stepping down from glacier noses to fling their silt-laden waters into the mother stream; and against the precipitous slopes hung mile-long talus slides and huge fields of "balancing boulders", where, it looked, the mere touch of a hand would start a rock avalanche of tremendous size.

The sight of that blue mountain cleft reminded Alan of the Teluwaceet notch and of kindly old

Luke; and his thoughts flowed on to that prophecy of Luke's, "The *Shagalasha* leader will even travel with him . . . and help him escape." How truly had that prophecy come to pass! Though no longer of the *Shagalasha*, Eric Norman was indeed in one canoe with him, aiding him to get away, precisely as old Luke had said.

He wondered whether that other prophecy of Luke's, "From the *Shagalasha* no one escapes," was likewise destined to prove true.

At the start of this trip he had believed that he was going to dislike Eric Norman intensely. There was plenty of material for dislike, for hatred even. Between them lay that silent antagonism over Joan. He was also mindful that Norman had chosen to sacrifice him in order to save Joan's father. And he grew bitter when he thought of Norman's return to Lac L'Outre, where Joan would be, and of Joan's enslaving obligations to the man.

But in spite of all this he could not make himself dislike Eric Norman. The instinctive friendship which had sprung up between them that first evening, when they shook hands on the Lac L'Outre wharf, had survived through all the vicissitudes since; and now, as the end to this man-hunt, they found themselves in a canoe together, fighting for each other, battling toward the same goal.

More than once Joan's name came to Alan's lips, and he was on the verge of bursting out, "For God's sake, Eric, don't let Joan marry you to pay a debt!

She doesn't like you, except as a friend. She's promised to me." But he fought those words back. He was going away. He knew not what lay ahead for him. Norman was Joan's only dependable friend. In the months to come, so dark and uncertain for her, she might need all the help that Eric Norman could give.

It seemed to him an ironic twist of fate that he should be fighting against capture when capture meant complete vindication for him, and should be battling to escape when escape meant a nameless hunted existence. With a certain grim satisfaction he reflected that at least in one instance he was taking human destiny into his hands and pointing it as he wished it to go. Though his own outlook was black with doubt, he was shielding Joan's father. Willingly and deliberately. Through his act Boyd Hastings could build back now. No accident there, but a man's free choice.

In the last few days, as the human story behind this whole Lac L'Outre trouble had been unfolded to him, he had more and more come to doubt his bitter philosophy about human life being a matter of blind luck. Had all this trouble sprung from accident, or from the *character* of the people involved? Hadn't Seth Grindley's greed started this disastrous avalanche? Hadn't Clint Thello's brutality kept it rolling? Hadn't Boyd Hastings, with his temporary fall from honesty; hadn't Joan, with her solemn sense of duty; hadn't Norman, with his

blindness at first to the truth; hadn't he himself, with his trusting naïveté toward Thello at the Dunbar mouth—hadn't they all contributed to this situation?

Minor accidents had indeed happened, all along the line; but it seemed to him that the major flow and direction of events had been determined by the character of the involved people, just as surely as these cradling ranges held Sulteena to its course. . . .

At four o'clock, when the sun had inched down behind the western watershed and the first shadows of evening were creeping into the valley, they came within sound of Babische Falls. Three miles more, and they would win their race against that launch.

As they were forging across a small lake, Alan noticed some queer object bobbing up and down on the water over to their right. It looked like a log. But over the top of it he imagined he could see the crown of a man's hat sticking up, and over the side of it a man's arm dangling.

"Eric, what d'you make of that thing over there?"

Norman peered at the object, in the failing light. "Looks like a water-logged canoe."

"That's what I thought. And if that isn't a man's arm and hat . . . Veer over and let's have a look-see."

As they drew near the object, they saw that it was indeed a canoe, tossing sluggishly, half-filled and about to sink.

They guided alongside.

Within the canoe, sloshing in the water, lay the body of a man, stiff and grotesque in death, with a gaping bullet hole squarely in the middle of his forehead.

Startled by their gruesome discovery, they caught hold of the craft and looked closer at the man, trying to read the dark riddle of their find.

The man's hat was lodged against the front thwart, his arm dangled over the gunwale, his rifle lay at the bottom of the boat, under the water. He had no paddle, no pack, no accouterments of a wilderness traveler except the gun. They judged he had been dead for a couple of days.

"He's a *métis*," Norman said, noticing the man's swart complexion and broad cheek-arch. He reached out, brushed the straggly hair from the man's face. "Why — why, that's Paul Painchaud! A trapper on the Dunbar. Why, he was the sentry up here at — at . . . Clancy told me distinctly that Painchaud was posted at Babische Falls. I've been wondering how we were going to get past him."

"Well, this's another break for us then, if that falls is unguarded," Alan commented. "Though I expect I'll get blamed for this fellow's death, too. He must've accidentally shot himself climbing into his canoe. Let's be high-tailing on. That launch is due and overdue. When we get past that falls I'll feel better."

Norman picked the dead man's rifle out of the

water and examined it. "Full clip of cartridges," he observed, "and one in the chamber. That means he *didn't* shoot himself. Somebody shot him, up there at Babische. He drifted down this far, lodging here and there on the way. He was in this canoe when he got killed — notice how he's sprawled."

"We'd better stop detectivating and get on above the falls," Alan said impatiently. "If that launch ever catches up with us, you and I'll be hung out on a line to dry."

"Just a minute," Norman delayed. With a true bloodhound's instinct he wanted to run this baffling trail he had struck. Long habit of investigating crime, searching for evidence and reading clues, made him forget the precious fleeting minutes. "Whoever shot Painchaud did it at close range. The bullet hole shows that. Close range means that the shooting wasn't a case of mistaken identity. This was an out-and-out killing, a murder."

Alan was not interested in the dead *métis*, but he did eye the light canoe thoughtfully. Though the craft was water-logged, it had no bullet holes in it and had suffered no damage in drifting down the river. On the twenty-mile stretch above Babische, where the dwindling Sulteena climbed up through a series of overfalls and white-water *sauts* to its head-water lake, this light craft might come in handy.

"Look, Eric — on those portages tonight this heavy boat of yours is going to be a man-killer, even after we throw the motor off. Let's use Painchaud's

canoe on that stretch. It's fifty pounds lighter."

"All right," Norman agreed absently. But he kept on searching for more clues.

A low sound far-away down Sulteena snapped him out of his absorption. Eight or nine miles distant, the sound came to them fitfully on the intermittent wind — the drone of that Police launch.

In feverish haste they tilted the water out of the canoe, reluctantly consigned the body of Paul Painchaud to the cold depths of the lake, tied the light craft to the stern of their boat, yanked at the motor and started it, and raced on up Sulteena.

At the falls they leaped out at the foot of the portage. Above the noise of the plunging waters they heard the big launch only a mile south, speeding up the twisty river at a reckless clip.

Abandoning Norman's boat and all his belongings except his rifle, they threw their paddles, guns, and Alan's pack into the Painchaud craft.

Alan hoisted the loaded canoe onto his shoulder. "Let's *travel*, or they'll catch us on this tote. Lead the way. I'll lug."

Norman grabbed one of the gas drums, spilled a little gasoline over the bottom of his boat, tossed a match at it, and shoved the craft into the grip of the current.

"What's the idea?" Alan demanded, as the burning motor-canoe started drifting downstream. "You can waste more time at the wrong time than any person ——"

"They'll run into that boat; they'll think we had a fight here with Painchaud; they'll stop and investigate. They may spend half an hour hunting around."

"Good idea," Alan admitted. "Like throwing your undershirt to a pack of wolves. Lord knows we can use an extra half hour."

Following the tote path, they headed into the twilight woods at a lope, circled around the overfalls, came out at the *embarque* above, and whirled for a glance back.

Down through the scraggly trees they saw the launch's searchlight cutting through the dusk as the launch skidded around the last bend and started up the short straightaway for the overfalls. Ahead of it Norman's burning motor-canoe was floating downstream. The searchlight switched across the water and picked it up; the launch engined down, swung over in that direction, circled the smaller boat.

Without waiting to see more, Alan and Norman splashed through the *embarque* shallows, threw their canoe to water and leaped in.

They had beaten the launch to the falls, but with pitifully little to spare. Instead of the three- or four-hour lead that they had hoped for, they had at most forty minutes. Ahead of them lay twenty miles of broken river, and darkness was closing down. Already weary from eight solid hours of paddle work, they were in no condition for an all-night battle up the dark and treacherous Sulteena. Those

canoes behind carried four or five men apiece, fresh and vigorous men, whereas they were but two, and worn out.

"Twenty miles," Alan grunted, between paddle strokes. "We'll make it. We'll make that pass before morning."

"Wait till you see the river ahead of us," Norman said gloomily. "Compared to it, you never saw portaging before."

The sky had cleared with the chill of evening; and two hours after dark a three-quarters moon rose in the east, glistening wanly on the surrounding *névés* and touching the Sulteena to a stream of dark molten silver.

Though they were traveling fast for so broken a river, they felt that their scant lead was being cut down, rod after rod, by the big pursuit party, and that they were sure to be overhauled before morning broke. Their arms ached from paddling, and their hands were a mass of blisters.

The pursuit was a silent pursuit now, and the silence of it made their nerves jumpy. Every time they turned for a glance back, they expected to see rifles glinting in the moonlight and half a dozen ominous shadows closing in upon them.

Long before midnight Norman's gloomy prediction about the upper Sulteena came true with a vengeance. Dropping more than a hundred feet to the mile, the river was a swift and violent stream, almost

a continuous succession of overfalls and *sauts*. By daylight and under the best of conditions the river was a heartbreaker. To Alan and Norman, fighting it in semi-darkness, exhausted, goaded by that silent pursuit, the stream was a nightmare. They were portaging more than they paddled; and the portage trail was a sorry excuse. They smashed their way through buckbrush thickets; groped and scrambled along slippery shingle; climbed over avalanche débris and over rock piles as big as houses; and waded hip-deep across tributary torrents of icy waters.

Alan stood up to the ordeal better than Norman. He was bigger and stronger of body; his summer of tremendous labor on the Grizzly sand battures had given him the stamina of a lean March wolf; and he had a little the greater power of will. When he saw his partner beginning to falter, sometime after midnight, he took over all the carrying. Across those fearful portages he toted the canoe, pack, rifles, paddles and everything, while Norman stumbled ahead, feeling out the trail.

And still later, when Norman could no longer grip a paddle with his numb and puffed-up hands, Alan took over all the paddle work too — such as there was of it.

“Lord, you’re not human!” Norman mumbled at him once, as Alan swung the canoe a-shoulder and trotted across a rocky tote path. “I hate to be a drag like this, but I can’t help it. I’m washed up, Alan.”

"You're battling along fine, fellow! Just keep on showing me the way. Where are we — how far from the pass?"

"I don't — can't exactly say. Six or seven miles, I think. I've sort of — of lost track."

"What time's it getting to be?"

"My watch got smashed."

Alan glanced up at the Sacred W and at misty Berenice's Hair. For almost a month the stars had been both clock and compass for Joan and him. It must be nearly three in the morning, now, he judged. Two hours till dawn. Two hours in which to make the pass. They could not possibly do it before day-break. They might reach the big moraine lake from which the Sulteena debouched; but he could never get across that lake and across the Big Portage before sun-up. And daylight meant a rifle fight — against ten men.

Over those last few miles he himself lost all sense of time and distance. Time seemed to have stopped. He seemed to be struggling on and on endlessly, on an endless treadmill of portages, rapids, overfalls, and short stretches where he flopped the canoe to water and paddled. He no longer felt pain from his blistered hands or his weary arms. Even the ache of exhaustion had left him. He fought on mechanically, hardly aware that he had a body.

His thoughts, too, became jumbled and confused. The long flight that Joan and he had made — their camps, their dozen narrow escapes, their night ad-

ventures on smoky waters, their bear cave and wind-fall homes — all this passed before him like the flitting pictures of a kaleidoscope. He hated to go across that divide up ahead and leave Joan. She had been so sweet a partner, so brave and uncomplaining. As he relived those moments when he and she confronted each other in the splash of moon, he could still hear her whispering, "I'll come — when you — send." He could not doubt her promise or her love, but he did doubt that they would ever see each other again. He felt that when he crossed that great divide she would belong to the world that was dead for him. . . .

An hour before dawn he heard a series of shots down stream. It was that signal series of the man-hunt: ! — ! ! — ! ! — !

"Those shots, Alan — what were they?" Norman asked, stumbling with exhaustion. "I didn't hear — very plainly."

"Signal shots, Eric. From the bunch behind us. They're signaling to this party on ahead. Telling them to get on the alert. Let's listen."

They halted, listened for a long minute; but no answer came from the posse at the Big Portage.

"They didn't hear," Alan said. "Too far away."

"This party behind us, Alan — how close do you think they are?"

"A good two miles back, Eric."

Norman straightened up, shook himself. "*What?* Two miles? That far?"


"Two miles or better. On this gosh-awful river that means an hour or more, Eric. Think of it — we're an hour ahead of 'em!" He pounded Norman on the shoulder. "Man, we outran 'em! We not only kept our lead but piled up more. We can beat 'em to the pass. They *can't* catch us now."

He found it hard to believe that he and Norman had actually outdistanced Bernard's big pursuit party, which had been fighting frantically all night to overhaul them. Despite darkness and exhaustion and the staggering paddle-odds against them, they had won that hopeless race.


Though they still had the ten men at the pass to deal with, their triumph over Bernard's posse put new life into them both. Norman shook off his daze of exhaustion, splashed icy water over his face and hands, and was able to help a little again with the paddle work.

While the stars and moon dimmed and the first faint gray of morning appeared in the eastern sky, they whipped up across a quiet stretch and made a last long carry, along a half-mile rapids. At the *embarque* above the rapids they came out to the edge of the big moraine lake, headwaters of the Sulteena.

Across that lake, a mile away, lay the foot of the Big Portage.



Chapter Fifteen



THEY stood on the edge of the cold gray lake, talking hurriedly. In their storm-bound camp of day before yesterday they had worked out an elaborate plan of how to draw aside the ten men yonder at the portage foot and give Alan a chance to slip through the mountain notch. But that plan called for darkness and plenty of time. Now, with day breaking and Bernard's big party only an hour behind, they had to cut away all the elaboration of their scheme and keep only the pith of it.

Norman pointed at the lake center, at a low mass sticking above the water like a backbone. "That's an island. You drop me off there, then swing up to the north shore and slip as close to the portage foot as you can without being seen.

"I'll build a fire on that island and draw the attention of those men. They'll send a canoe out to in-

vestigate. I'll drive some bullets at it. That will stir a commotion. The posse will think they've got *you* cornered; and they'll come across and surround that island. I'll get down in a rock nest and argue with them, and while they're busy with me, you can get over the divide."

They slammed their canoe onto the water and skirled out upon the moraine lake.

Day was coming on. In that high region lying open to the sky, it was breaking swiftly, compared with dawn in the lower-country valleys. The first rays of the sun were gilding the pinnacle rocks of the highest peaks, and the gray light was broadening almost visibly.

When they were halfway to the island, they were startled by the *cr-aa-ck-ck* of two rifles down toward the south shore of the lake. They whirled, looked in that direction and made out the bright flame of a small campfire, either on the mainland or on an islet just offshore.

While they were puzzling over that little campfire and those shots, half a dozen other guns joined those first two. The shooting swelled to a fierce hot fusillade. The snarl and *kr-oo-mm* of eight or nine rifles came rolling across the water like the sound of a pitched battle.

"What the condemnsternation?" Alan breathed.

Norman shook his head, blankly. Their boat drifted. Peering through the gray light, they saw that the campfire was at the tip of a rocky head-

land yonder; and they caught glimpses, dim and obscure, of four canoes encircling that headland and apparently closing in upon the little camp.

"It's these men!" Alan jerked out. "Eric, that's this party at the pass. It can't be anybody else."

"Can you see what they're doing, what they're shooting at?"

Alan dipped his paddle blade-deep. "It's a gin-damn we care what they're shooting at! They're out of *our* road, and that's what counts! Come alive, man — *paddle!* We're streaking across to that portage foot!"

"But they wouldn't leave the pass completely unguarded," Norman objected. "They've surely got a man or two —"

"What if they have? We're poor specimens if we can't handle a coupla men. *Come on!*" He sent the canoe lunging. "Don't you know a break when one hits you square between the eyes?"

"It may be a break, and it may not," Norman answered. He started paddling. "We'll chance it. But see here — when we get close to that landing, you keep down out of sight, or you're apt to get a *bullet* between your eyes. If there are any guards yonder I'll palaver them. They won't be suspicious of me — the word hasn't got to this outfit yet that I'm with you. I'll draw them close enough that we can spring a hold-up and take their guns away."

They raced on past the mid-lake island, and on toward the foot of the portage. The rocky shore rose

out of the grayness and took on clear outline. Alan stopped paddling, crouched down so that he was hidden, and peered over the gunwale at the landwash ahead.

In the swiftly unfolding dawn he spotted the place — in lee of a huge rock — where the ten men were camping. A fire smoldered; a lone canoe was beached there; pots and kettles and camp things were lying around the fire; sleeping pokes and blankets were scattered about in confusion, as though the men had quitted them hastily just a little while ago.

He saw nobody. The camp seemed entirely deserted.

As their canoe came within a hundred feet of the landing, Norman called guardedly, "Hello! Anybody about?"

No one answered.

From the landing a dim tote path, centuries old, trod by the moccasins of vanished mountain tribes, led up the steep slope, winding through fields of "balancing boulders", up and up a full mile to the high rocky divide that stood limned against the morning sky.

Alan's eyes followed the trail up through those treacherous rock fields, but he saw no sentry. The camp, the trail, the whole pass appeared empty and unguarded. It seemed as though those ten men had jumped out of their sleeping pokes in wild haste, piled into their canoes and streaked across to that

rocky headland without even leaving a sentry at the portage foot.

Alan pawed at his hair. "Eric, I just don't cotton to this!"

"To what?"

"This layout. It's *too much* luck. A run of luck like we've been having — it always ends in a jolt to knock your teeth loose."

Suspicious of a trap, they turned and stared at the south shore of the lake. The shooting had died out, but the light had broadened enough that they could distinctly see those four canoes nosing along that headland.

They had to believe what their eyes saw. Beyond any question the men yonder were the party supposed to be guarding the pass. But down there they were, more than a mile away. And here lay the Big Portage, wide open, without guard, without a single rifle to halt Alan's escape.

They pushed on in and landed near the camp.

As they stepped out of their canoe they ran squarely into a discovery as baffling as that mysterious rifle shooting a while ago, and as gruesome as their discovery of Paul Painchaud's body last evening. Behind a landwash boulder lay a middle-aged Timber Cree, sprawled faced downward, with a long-shafted knife in his back.

Though he had been brutally stabbed half a dozen times and smashed on the head with a belt-ax, the

man was not quite dead. Mercifully he was unconscious, but he was still moving a little, and his fingers were clawing at a lichened rock.

In a surge of instinctive pity Alan bent down, withdrew the knife, gently turned the Indian over, and eased him into a more comfortable position. Forgetting those enemy canoes and his own desperate need of whipping across that divide, he looked up at Norman.

"Do you know him, Eric?" he asked in awed tones.

Visibly shaken, Norman knelt down and tried to rouse the Indian. "Chog-muh! What happened here? Who did this to you? Tell me, Chog-muh. This is Norman. Do you hear me? — *Norman*. Tell me who did this."

The man did not answer. He was dying.

"Who is he?" Alan demanded. "And who knifed and axed him like this?"

"Why, he's Chog-muh, Alan," Norman said brokenly. "My best Cree friend, the best guide and scout I ever had. He's worked for me as a special on a dozen bush cases —"

"But who killed him?"

"Why — I . . . Alan, I can't understand this. I can't imagine who killed him."

"Was he one of these men here at the pass?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, he wasn't murdered by any of them. It was somebody else."

In grief and bewilderment Norman gazed down at

the Cree. "Chog-muh here, murdered," he said, thinking profoundly. "And Paul Painchaud, shot to death at Babische. And probably other men killed, whom we know nothing about . . . Alan, there's been some kind of a traveling death at loose along the upper Sulteena."

"You're right, dead right. But you and I, Eric — *we'll* get the blame for these killings."

"No, no! I can prove otherwise. I'm *going* to prove otherwise. I'm going to find the person who killed Chog-muh, and kill *him*."

"I hope you do; I wish I could go with you on that job," Alan said. He took Norman by the arm. "But right now, Eric, hadn't we better be using this wide-open chance, before those canoes get back here? If I'm to get across that divide, Eric, I'll have to go."

Norman shook out of his bewilderment. "Yes, you'll have to go, Alan. I can attend to this job after you're safe."

"You're staying here at this landing?"

"Yes. I'll get down among these rocks; and if those men come back across the lake, I'll hold them off till I'm sure you're down into the timber belt on the west slope."

Alan gathered up his pack, rifle and Luke's bow from the canoe. Norman helped him adjust the tump strap of his pack, and then walked with him a little distance up the trail.

They had come far together since that evening on

the Lac L'Outre wharf, and they were loath to part.

Norman took out a wallet and slipped it into Alan's pocket. "There's five hundred in that, Alan. I brought it along for you. It may help some when you reach the Coast towns. You really ought to lie low for a time. Write me, and I'll send you more."

"Why — why thanks," Alan gulped. "I won't need any more, but I'll write you, Eric. I'll let you know that I made the Coast all right."

Norman stopped. "I'd better not go any farther with you." He held out his hand. "Good-by, Alan, and *good* luck. You've surely had your share of *bad*."

Halfway up to the divide, Alan turned for a glance back. The canoes of Bernard's pursuit party had not yet appeared at the far end of the lake. The four canoes at the south shore had just left the rocky headland and were returning to camp.

As yet those men had not seen him or Norman. At the landing down below, Norman had settled himself among some rocks, ready to hold those boats off when they did return.

He waved at Norman, but the latter did not see him; and he hurried on.

Just below the high divide he came across a small patch of snow in a boulder field — a thin little sprinkle of snow from some passing cloud last night; and with a shock of surprise he saw a man's

tracks in that skiff of white. Very fresh, they looked to him; and they led up the path toward the crest.

He slipped his rifle from its shoulder sling and scrutinized the gray rocks above, thinking that in the morning twilight one of those ten men had climbed to the ridge to take up lookout for the day. But on second thought he realized that this could not be true. There were nine men in those four canoes — he had counted them; and Chog-muh, evidently posted at the portage foot as guard, made the tenth.

As he looked again at the tracks, Norman's phrase, "a traveling death at loose along the upper Sulteena", sprang into his mind. The Cree down there, brutally murdered; that campfire and the bang-whanging of those rifles at the headland; the Painchaud *métis*, shot to death at Babische Falls; that lone stranger's camp which Joan and he had come across on the Lynette creek — between all those disjointed facts he now saw a thread of connection and of explanation. Somebody besides himself had made flight up Sulteena, hiding by day, traveling by night, and successfully coming through the man-hunt storm! Somebody besides himself had had need of getting through Sulteena Pass to the oblivion of the ranges beyond!

This unknown, whose fresh tracks he was looking at now, was the person who had camped overnight on the Lynette creek. The man had worked on northwest, a little ahead of the worst of the man-hunt.

At Babische Falls, Paul Painchaud had tried to halt him; and the unknown had put a bullet between Painchaud's eyes. Coming on to the pass and finding it blocked by this party of ten, the man had cunningly built a fire on the far south shore, precisely as Norman and himself had originally planned to do; and had drawn nine of those men out of his road. While they were surrounding that headland and shooting up his empty camp, he had sneaked around to the portage foot, got the drop on the Cree, murdered the Indian, and hit across the divide.

Though all this was conjecture on Alan's part, he felt positive that his guess struck near the truth — so positive that he wanted to turn back and tell Norman about these tracks and this unknown. But he dared not turn back or delay. He could not even shout down to Norman. Those boats were too close.

As he hurried on up the trail, he swore silently: "Those newspaper men, calling Joan and me a pair of phantoms — they were plenty right about the phantom part but they stuck the label on the wrong package. Hell, Joan and I couldn't hold a candle to this Jake! His canoe was *the* phantom canoe. We were just amateurs."

He wondered who this shadowy unknown, this artist with rifle and knife, could possibly be. Except Clint Thello and himself, he knew of no criminal or wanted man in Sulteena territory. Joan had mentioned none, nor had Norman.

Thello . . . Could it be Clint Thello? Possible.

Instead of holing up for the long winter, as both Norman and Joan firmly believed, Thello might have been so avid to cash in on his loot and swash-buckle in the Alaska towns that he had decided to make his get-away that fall. He could have brought those furs up the river easily enough. That entire small fortune in peltry made less of a load than many a trapper's ordinary pack. Mink and otter, dark fox and pine marten — those furs were light as banknotes and nearly as precious.

He heard a rifle shot at the camp far below. Flashing a glance back, he saw that the four canoes had come within long range of the landing and that Norman had started shooting at them to keep them away.

He told himself: "I'd better put my foot in front of my nose and *git!* Eric can't hold off nine men all day."

In spite of his haste and the steep trail, he was gripped and shaken by the grandeur of that Sulteena *haut d'en pays*, as he climbed on to the stark divide. The high icy winds that blew around him with steady moan seemed like the voice of the Arctic North, spreading winter down across the lands to the south. For a hundred miles to the southeast he could trace Sulteena Valley — a great trough still filled with purple shadow. Creeping down and down from the naked pinnacle rocks, the sun had fallen upon the glistening *névés* all around him, and was shattering into a thousand dazzling fires on the white snow.

On the ridgeline he paused for a last glance back. At the distant end of the lake the six canoes of Bernard's pursuit party had just reached the *embarque*. Down at the landing the four canoes were milling about, several hundred yards off shore; and the men were blazing away at Norman in the rock shelter.

He knew that Norman would hold them off, for a little time at least. It was not even necessary, now, that those men should be held back. Long before they could climb this east slope, he would be down the western and lost in its thick timber.

As he gazed at the cold lake, with the high winds sweeping him and the flashing fires of the *névés* half-blinding him, he was filled with exultation at having made good his get-away. He had ended Raoul Bernard's fourteen-year record of perfection! With Joan's help and Eric Norman's timely aid he had cut his way through the spectacular man-hunt and stood free now. *From the Shagalasha someone had escaped.*

He started down the western slope. It was steeper and rockier than the eastern. The trail, winding through fields of "balancing boulders" that looked ready to dislodge at a jar or push, was enough to frighten a person; and he marveled that those rocks could have lain there through the storm and thaw of centuries.

In something of a cosmic mood, he reflected that

old Mother Earth was pretty steady and reliable, even if his astronomy professor did call her a dinky planet in a dinky solar system. She could twirl at a thousand miles an hour and do her year-journey of half a billion miles without shaking or toppling the most precarious of those stones.

When he was a quarter way down toward the timber he happened to notice some big queer object moving along the tote trail ahead of him, three hundred yards away. At first glance he thought that the odd bulky thing was a trundling grizzly, hunting for lemmings or conies among those rocks. At second glance he saw that the creature was a man, toting three good-sized packs on his back.

He stopped short, swearing at this untimely encounter. His guess about those tracks and the "traveling death" had been right, then. Yonder was the "traveling death" itself, in flesh and blood.

He cursed the man for going so slowly and monopolizing that path. With any other person he would have hurried and caught up, to shake hands as a fellow-outlaw, and team up for the tedious foot-slog journey across the ranges. But he wanted nothing to do with the wanton killer in front of him. He thought of Painchaud and the stabbed Chog-muh, and loathed the man.

Furthermore, he was afraid for that stranger to glimpse him. The man seemed to have a habit of shooting people on sight and asking questions afterward. And if the stranger *was* Thello, as he half

suspected, one glimpse would be plenty. Thello would drop him in his tracks. According to Norman, Clint Thello was the deadliest rifle shot that Lac L'Outre had ever seen — a man who could clip a pine cone from a tree with one bullet and shatter it in mid-air with the next. A rifle argument with him would be plain suicide.

Desperately impatient to get on down to that timber, he stepped into the hiding of a boulder nest, watched the man, debated swiftly what to do. He dared not try to pass the stranger up. Nor could he tag along behind. What with the steep trail and those cumbersome packs, the man was traveling entirely too slowly.

He finally decided to leave the tote trail altogether and diagonal down to the woods. It would take him longer; and the slope was dangerous, because of the slide rock and the treacherous boulder couloirs. But he had no alternative.

Down below him the man halted beside a big rock to rest. Leaning back against the boulder to take the load from his shoulders, he turned for a glance at the divide; and for the first time Alan had good view of him. He started violently, and a cry stifled in his throat. The stranger of the Dunbar mouth! Thello! The glint-eyed stranger who had robbed him, framed him.

For a month he had vengefully daydreamed of encountering that stranger, some time, some place, and annihilating him bare-handed; and now yonder

the man stood, against that granite, in the bright morning sun.

With a fierce tug-of-war inside of him Alan glared down at the killer. His good sense pleaded: "Don't jump him! Don't start trouble. Let him alone. He's poison." The memory of Chog-muh and Painchaud was fresh in his mind; and he remembered, too, a warning from Norman, "Alan, if you ever do meet Thello in the Panhandle and try to settle your score, you'd better make your first shot good."

Besides his fear of that murderous rifle, he realized that if he and Thello should get into a deadlocked fight among these rocks and drag the fight out till the posse caught up and nailed them both, one word from that bush-sneak would be the death warrant for Joan's daddy.

But the sight of the man had exploded something within him; and his good sense, his sane judgment, were swamped and drowned in a wave of vengeance. A month of dammed-up wrath against the Dunbar stranger had broken loose in him, like a floodgate giving way. He had known that the world was not big enough to keep him from meeting that stranger again. He had sworn to search up and down the Panhandle towns till he found that framer and obliterated him. Now he had met his man. Here on this *haut d'en pays*, in the icy moaning winds, in the dazzling fires of the *névés*. And he could not let the man go.

Thello straightened up and started on down the

trail. Alan slipped his pack to the ground, snapped the trigger safety of his rifle and rose from his hiding.

"Thello, *you're dead!*" he pronounced. "You're walking along there but you're dead and you don't know it. I'm killing you. You took my gold and hung a murder on me, and now when I've caught up with you, you're not getting away. You'll do no squealing on Joan's daddy when I finish with you. Dead rats don't squeal."

He left the rock shelter and went down the tote trail after Thello.

He intended to slip up to close range and make his first shot good. His first shot had to be good. If he missed, Thello would kill him.

He swore at those packs on Thello's back. They shielded the man. He wondered why Thello was traveling with so bulky and cumbersome an outfit. Only then did he realize that two of those packs were peltry. The Grindley loot. All the time that he had glared at Thello, his tumultuous wrath and his fear of that sinister rifle had kept him from giving those packs a thought. Not until that moment, when the packs threatened to prevent him from getting in a shot at his enemy, did he become alive to them and to their crashing significance.

The stolen furs! He was catching Thello with the stamped loot on his back! If he killed Thello then and there, the question of Seth Grindley's murderer would be settled with a bang that would rock all

Sulteena. He would be a *free man again* — if he got Thello. He could go back across that divide as Alan Laramie. To his old world. To Joan.

In flashes quicker than thought he saw other tremendous consequences that would flow from his catching Thello red-handed and killing him. He would dynamite the charges against Joan. The Police would drop those charges like hot bricks. He could light a basket of firecrackers under Inspector Raoul Bernard for hounding him when he was innocent. He would get Eric free. He and Eric could prove, if any proof was wanted, that Thello had been that traveling death along Sulteena. . . .

His moccasin incautiously dislodged a little rock, and it started rolling. He stooped and grabbed for it, but missed; and the rock went bouncing down the steep slope. It was small — no larger than his first; but it made a clatter on the shingle, it struck against a bigger rock and started that one rolling; and the two went scurrying downhill like frightened rabbits, flushing other rabbits — a stampede of little granite creatures —

At the noise above him Thello whirled around, glanced up slope, saw Alan. With one quick jerk of his head he freed himself of his tump strap, and the cumbersome packs fell to the ground. With a lightning-quick snatch he grabbed his rifle from its shoulder sling and whipped it against his cheek.

Alan's gun was in his hands, at alert; and he beat his enemy to the trigger squeeze. At his first bullet

Thello's hat flipped off, crazily, as though knocked off by unseen fingers. His second bullet hit. He saw Thello jump, heard the man yell. His third screamed past his enemy, caromed off a granite rock, and sang a harmless ricochet song out through the air. His fourth and fifth missed widely.

With but one cartridge in his gun, Alan paused for cool aim. Panic was quivering through him like an electric tingle. His first shot had *not* been good. His first *five* had not brought Thello down. This sixth shot would be his last one. Thello would kill him before he could reload.

But that sixth shot of his was never fired. Thello had snapped out of the shock of his slight wound; had steadied himself and whipped up his rifle again. Carelessly, without even the appearance of taking aim, he began shooting. And his shooting was a different story from Alan's. It was like a butchery.

His first murderous bullet caught Alan hard in the shoulder, spun him half around, and knocked him to his knees. His second hit Alan's rifle, shattered the clip mechanism, drove a sliver of steel into Alan's forehead, and tore the gun out of his hands, leaving him weaponless.

Groggy with pain and bullet-shock, Alan scrambled to his feet and started back up slope, to the shelter of those boulders. Thello's Savage spoke again, and a slug drilled through Alan's hand. He flipped the blood away and lunged on for that shelter. Something hit him in the right leg; his leg

buckled under him; he went down on hands and knees.

As he struggled up a second time, Thello's fourth bullet, aimed at his head, knocked his battered hat off. He fell flat to escape that dread rifle; and as he fell, a fifth and sixth steel-jacket screamed over his body.

Before Thello could clip in another magazine, he crawled on to the rock nest, wormed in among the boulders and got out of sight.

Breathing in hoarse gasps, he lay there dazed, fighting against a dead faint, with the mountain-side heaving and tossing, and the *névés* going around and around in a blur of white and of flashing fires.

Holding on to consciousness doggedly, he managed, after a little time, to raise his head and look down the slope.

Thello had calmly reloaded, picked up his hat, and was slipping out along the slope to a deep-walled rock couloir.

Swiping a trickle of blood from his eyes, Alan watched Thello, wondering what the man intended doing. As Thello reached the couloir and slid down its shingle wall and headed up toward him, sneaking from rock to rock, the man's intentions struck home to him with a jolt. That couloir led up to within a few yards of this boulder nest. Thello was following it up, slipping close, taking no chances on his enemy's having a belt-gun. Thello had seen

that he was desperately wounded and all but helpless. Instead of wasting shots or time, the fellow was stalking up, in safe cover, to pump a magazine of bullets into him at point-blank range and finish him off in a hurry.

With a great effort Alan pulled Luke's bow from his pack and took it from its case, thinking that he might get in a lucky shot when Thello came near. But his right shoulder was paralyzed, his right arm hung limp; he could not even string the massive bow, much less use it. He was utterly without weapon or defense.

"Thello" he yelled weakly, thinking to halt the man and save himself. And he was thinking too of Joan's father. That big posse might nail Thello yet, before he could get on down to the timber. "A Police party — just over that divide — after me . . . You'd better make tracks!"

"Yeah!" the man snarled. "I make tracks all right — soon's I git you. You shot at me, and I kill you for dat."

In his extremity Alan turned his head and glanced up toward the hogback. For a month those man-hunters had been his enemies. Now they had suddenly become his friends, and he prayed to see them whipping over that ridge and racing down toward him. But the mountainside was empty, silent. At that landing back yonder on the moraine lake Eric Norman was fighting those canoes off, holding them back. The Police party would come too late to

save him from Thello's rifle. In five minutes more, in ten at the most, that cold-blooded killer would be walking away from his bullet-riddled body.

To throw a scare into Thello and halt that stalking death, he shoved at a little pumpkin-sized stone and rolled it down into the couloir. It struck against a large rock and lodged. He toppled another, starting it rolling. Bigger and more roundish than the first, it went bounding down the trough, gathering momentum, caroming off the heavier boulders, smashing into and toppling the smaller ones, and starting a miniature avalanche of small and medium-sized rocks.

As the stones careened down toward Thello, the killer leaped from behind the big boulder where he had been crouching, and scurried for the side of the couloir. But he saw that the stones would catch him before he could climb out of that gorge. With a yelp of fright he leaped back to shelter of the big rock.

Several of the stones smacked against his shelter, but the sturdy rock held, and the little avalanche stampeded harmlessly past him.

At the man's yelp, at the swift and astonishing havoc caused by the small stone he had toppled, Alan scrambled to his knees, yelling, pushing his unexpected advantage. He shoved at a hundred-pound rock, toppled it, rolled it into the couloir. He was reeling with nausea; his right arm was useless; his right leg crumpled when he tried to stand

erect; but he realized that he was not weaponless. In his hands lay a fearful weapon, an avalanche; and he fought for the strength to launch it.

He toppled another and another rock and sent them bounding after the first. He put his shoulder against a heavy smasher and heaved with all his flagging strength, and finally toppled the boulder over the ravine edge, to follow the others on their maddened sweep down the trough.

With a red mist in his eyes, he tried to watch what was happening in that gully of death. He was so sick, so faint, that he could hardly see, hardly hold his head up. The sun seemed to be turning dark; and there was a thunder in his ears that was not the thunder of those galloping boulders. But as the avalanche went crashing down the couloir, he caught red-blurred glimpses of a terror-stricken figure leaping up, scurrying for the gorge wall, fighting, too late, to get out of that death-trap ravine.

Thello made it to the steep wall, climbed and pawed a little way up the bare slippery shingle. Then the cloud of dust and splintered rock and flying stones engulfed him. He was plucked off the shingle and sucked into the slide. . . . Above the swelling thunder of the dry avalanche a long-drawn yell came to Alan. The yell rose to a piercing shriek that cut through the boom and rumble of those maddened rocks. Then the cry was silenced.

When the avalanche had swept past that point

and Alan looked again, he saw a crumpled hat rolling slowly down the ravine; and at the bottom of the gorge lay a human figure, crushed and battered almost beyond recognition.

A minute or two later Alan heard the distant ripping crash of his avalanche piling into the timber far down the western slope.

He turned feebly and looked up at the divide and saw nothing yet of the Police party. They would come; he knew they would come; but he was passing out, and they might miss him, might never see him, among the gray rocks of that mountainside; and he would lie there and bleed to death of his wounds. . . .

Still battling against unconsciousness, which was pulling him under like black roaring waters, he rolled and clawed and muscled his way down to his shattered rifle, and stuck his handkerchief on the muzzle of it, and propped the gun against a rock — raising a little flag that was indeed white but scarcely a token of surrender.

Chapter Sixteen

YES, sir; they live here, sir," the landlady said to Eric Norman. It was the first time that she had ever been face to face with an officer of the redoubtable Mounted, and she was considerably flustered. "But they're not at home just now, sir — either of 'em."

"Will they be back shortly, do you think?" Norman inquired.

"They should be, sir, at five. They both have university work until five," the landlady informed. Then curiosity got the better of her awe, and she asked, "Are you maybe calling on them in, ah, an official way? Have they done something ——?"

"Oh, no! I'm calling as a friend. You see, I'm quite a close friend to both of them. Perhaps you've heard them mention me — Eric Norman."

The landlady beamed. "Indeed I have, sir, many

the time! Why, I feel almost like I know you myself, sir — they've talked about you so much. And I read about your doings in the papers, too! Won't you come in, please? You'd be right welcome to wait in their 'partment, I'm sure."

She led the way inside and opened the door of an apartment and snapped on the lights, for the gloom of the November twilight was falling over the city.

"There you are, sir. They'll be here directly, I'm certain." And when Norman, thanking her, showed no signs of wanting to gossip, she withdrew and closed the door.

It gave Norman a queer sensation to find himself there in the place where Alan and Joan Laramie were living together. On his journey from Lac L'Outre to Edmonton he had debated whether to visit them or not, and in the end he had decided to come. He felt that if he faced the worst and got it over with, perhaps then he could begin to forget.

Their apartment, as he glanced around at it, seemed a very small abode for two people — merely a tiny kitchenette, bath, curtained-off sleeping nook, and the living room where he was standing. Joan had made the place bright and cozy, but to his observant eye it looked poverty-pinched. The dust which Alan had washed out last summer and which had been recovered from Clint Thello's pack — they were both trying to go through the college year on

that. Seven hundred dollars was little enough for one person, let alone two.

He thought of offering them money-help. A thousand dollars meant little to him, and to them it would be a windfall. But he knew they would refuse a loan, and he decided not to mention the matter.

Through one window he had view of the Saskatchewan, and through another of the university campus and buildings. Moving over to Joan's desk, he stood looking down. The orderly neatness of the books, papers and desk things seemed like a reflection of the girl herself. He noticed a copy of Xenophon's "Anabasis", a notebook labeled "Home Economics", and a thesis that she was writing on the dialects of the Sulteena mountain tribes.

Near her study lamp lay that long-suffering red tam of hers. It gave him a bad tweak, with its host of memories; and he turned away.

He found Alan's desk an exuberant riot of papers, geology charts, mining pamphlets, and sketches which Alan had made of some placer-mining contraption. There were dozens upon dozens of those sketches. He picked up several, examined them. All of them were outline studies of gold-sand machines of the "roll-and-spill" type. Some ran to huge ambitious sizes; others were small and sober-minded. One of them, a medium-sized machine of seventy tons a day capacity, had been worked out in minute detail and captioned with a confident "Dandy!"

He rather believed that Alan, with his buoyant industry and hard-knock experience, would make a splendid go of his Grizzly River scheme; but he was somewhat skeptical concerning that little hobo army which Alan had talked so much about when he lay sick at Lac L'Outre, all shot up and delirious.

Lighting a cigarette, he glanced at the curious wall decorations that Joan and Alan had put up. No pennants or collegiate gewgaws, but mementos of Sulteena and particularly of that man-hunt. A ram-horn bow and a quiver of fluted arrows. A blackened skillet, still smelling of campfire smoke. A shattered rifle. And two canoe paddles, *crossed*.

In spite of Alan's and Joan's glad surprise when they returned, Norman stayed only for a cup of tea with them.

It was something of an ordeal to sit there and chat in friendly way with the brown-eyed girl whom he once had been very confident of marrying. Strangely, to talk with Alan was not so bad. There was some rare quality about Alan — his honesty, his humor, his warm-hearted friendliness — that disarmed even jealousy.

And he could not forget that to Alan's heroic fight in the icy winds of the *haut d'en pays* he owed his reinstatement and his new standing in the Force. In the hour of his disgrace and humiliation he had been delivered from his enemies as by a lightning stroke — because of Alan's battle with Thello. . . .

Neither Alan nor Joan made any display of their *lune de miel* happiness; but he could see their passionate affection for each other cropping out unconsciously — in their glances, in the mere inflection of their voices.

As he had expected, Joan's first question was of her father.

"Eric, he writes me that he's getting along well; but *is* he — really?"

"Very well indeed," Norman answered truthfully; but he thought with pity of the gray-haired man at Lac L'Outre who was quietly going about his work, penniless, childless. "If I were you, Joan, I'd visit him at Christmas. He misses you a deal. A visit from you would cheer him as nothing else could."

"I was planning to go," Joan said. "And I'll be with him quite a lot next summer, of course."

"How are the bullet holes coming along, Alan?" Norman inquired. "I notice you're still on crutches."

"Will be for a month yet, damn all! It about burns me up to go hobbling around like a ninny. It puts an awful crimp in a fellow's style."

"It would in *yours*," Norman remarked.

"Say, Eric," Alan asked, "did you see the headline display that Joan and I tacked up? No? Then take a look." He turned Joan's student lamp so that it shone on the south wall, which Norman had not previously noticed because of the dim light. "Doesn't that about knock your eyeballs off?"

"Good heavens!" Norman exclaimed. The entire south wall, from ceiling to floor, was covered with newspaper headlines — big black streamers of type that fairly shouted at a person.

"Read 'em!" Alan urged. "Read 'em and *laugh!*"

Norman's eyes swept across those splashes of big type. The headlines had been arranged in chronological order; and they told, in a brief cryptic way, the whole story of that wilderness man-hunt of which he and Joan and Alan had been the principals. They told of Alan's first arrest. Of his escape and his flight with Joan. Of the Teluwaceet dash. Of how Inspector Bernard had supplanted Corporal Norman and massed those boats and men against the two young fugitives. Of those mysterious murders along the upper Sulteena. Of Alan's death fight with Clint Thello. Of how old Superintendent Merritt himself then hurried to Lac L'Outre, made a complete investigation in person, and fanned Raoul Bernard back to his Headquarters desk with a blistering reprimand and a badly cracked reputation in the Mounted.

"Read this'n!" Alan bade, pointing with his crutch at a headline toward the end. "It's the gem of 'em all. And read the column heading under it."

Norman smiled at the streamer: **OUTLAW AND DISGRACED MOUNTY NAIL KILLER**. His smile broadened at the column heading beneath: **LARAMIE AND EX-CORPORAL NORMAN, ON TRAIL OF WILDERNESS BANDIT, HAVE TO CUT THEIR WAY**

THROUGH MAN-HUNT AND FIGHT OFF THE MOUNTED TO GET THEIR MAN.

"I hope to heaven, Alan," Norman said, "that nobody ever finds out the truth, the actual truth, about how we — or you, rather — ran into Clint Thello."

"Don't worry. Nobody will. It's dead and buried. You and Joan and I are the only ones on earth who know the truth about that business."

"But I feel like a liar! Everybody believes that you and I trailed Thello right through that man-hunt, and overhauled and killed him deliberately!"

"Well, what if they do believe it? That's not our fault. *We* didn't lie. They jumped to that conclusion themselves. We just kept our mouths shut, when we saw which way the wind was blowing, and let 'em believe whatever they wanted to. Isn't that so?"

Norman nodded. He did not like to reflect that he had ridden back into the Mounted and on to his sergenty on an accident. It seemed like one of those capricious turns of destiny which Alan used to be so bitter about.

"But my score with luck is about even up, I guess," he thought. "I got unjustly damned and then unjustly praised."

As he stirred his tea and relived that terrible night which he and Alan had put in on the upper Sulteena, he wondered whether Alan's new philosophy about destiny — or at least the latest edition

of that philosophy which he had heard about from the up-and-down collegian — wasn't pretty close to the truth. Good luck and bad did happen, undeniably; but in the long run a man's character was his destiny. That meeting with Clint Thello, for instance, in the morning fires of the Big Portage — was that the accident it seemed, or had it not sprung straight from Laramie's stubborn and magnificent battle to escape?

Alan hobbled out to the taxi with him when he left.

Joan was clearing away the tea things when Alan came back in, for a party of their college friends were dropping in on them that evening.

"Snowing outside, kiddy," he remarked, gazing out the north window. "Old man Winter is winding up to sock us with a bad woolly-whipper."

"Snow doesn't mean so much to us as it did once," Joan said.

Alan turned around from the window. "Say, partner, d'you know what Eric told me out there at the curb?"

"What?"

"He's on his way to Regina. Summoned. And then on to Ottawa."

"What for?"

"I don't exactly know. He didn't exactly say. But I'll bet a leg that the higher-ups of the Police want a look at him and a talk with him in person.

I'll bet a leg, I'll bet *both* legs, that they're figuring him for a commission."

"I knew that from his manner," Joan said quietly. "But you'd better not be so free with your legs, Alan, when you've only got one good one."

"And d'you know what else he said?"

"What?"

"He offered to advance me the money next spring for this gold-washing machine of ours."

Joan turned to him, in alarm, in seriousness. "Alan! Listen to me — don't you take that. Don't you get under any obligation or debt —— "

"It isn't any obligation, honey. This's a business proposition. He considers the money a handsome investment. He's throwing in as a silent partner."

"You're sure of that?"

"Dead sure, or I wouldn't have agreed to his offer. I feel exactly as you do about this obligation angle. We're out of obligation now, and I wouldn't get back in for all the gold in the Grizzlies."

Joan came over to the window where he stood, and slipped an arm through his, and they looked out into the twilit gloom. The snow was coming down in earnest — big thick flakes that meant a heavy fall; and the first breath of the blizzard to come was stirring in the rowan trees outside. As they gazed past the dim yellow lights of the campus, they were looking on and on into the northwest, to far-away Sulteena and those white silent ranges,

and thinking of the eager zestful work that awaited them there when spring came again.

A little wind-moan at the window, a moan like a tiny wolf-howl, made Joan shiver.

"What's the matter, sweet?" Alan asked.

"Nothing, except — I was just thinking . . . Alan, suppose you and I were hiding under a log up the Sulteena *now*! Wouldn't it be dreadful?"

"I don't know about that," Alan mildly disagreed. He added, musingly, "That month wasn't so bad, partner. As far as high doings is concerned, it was a month of months for you and me. Kiddy, we may never have a time like that again in all our born days!"

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At its mildest Lac L'Outre was not a sociable community. After the murder of Seth Grindley every stranger was under suspicion. Alan Laramie, returning from five months of prospecting, found himself promptly charged with murder on his arrival at the settlement. Even to himself his story sounded thin. But when talk of lynching is in the air it is dangerous to wait for long investigation. Just one person believed in his innocence, and that one, a girl.

This is a story of flight through the wilderness, followed every mile by man-hunters, a story of the Canadian Northwest even more exciting than the author's "Challenge of the North" and "Resurrection River." If you like red-blooded romance, you will greatly enjoy this book.

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